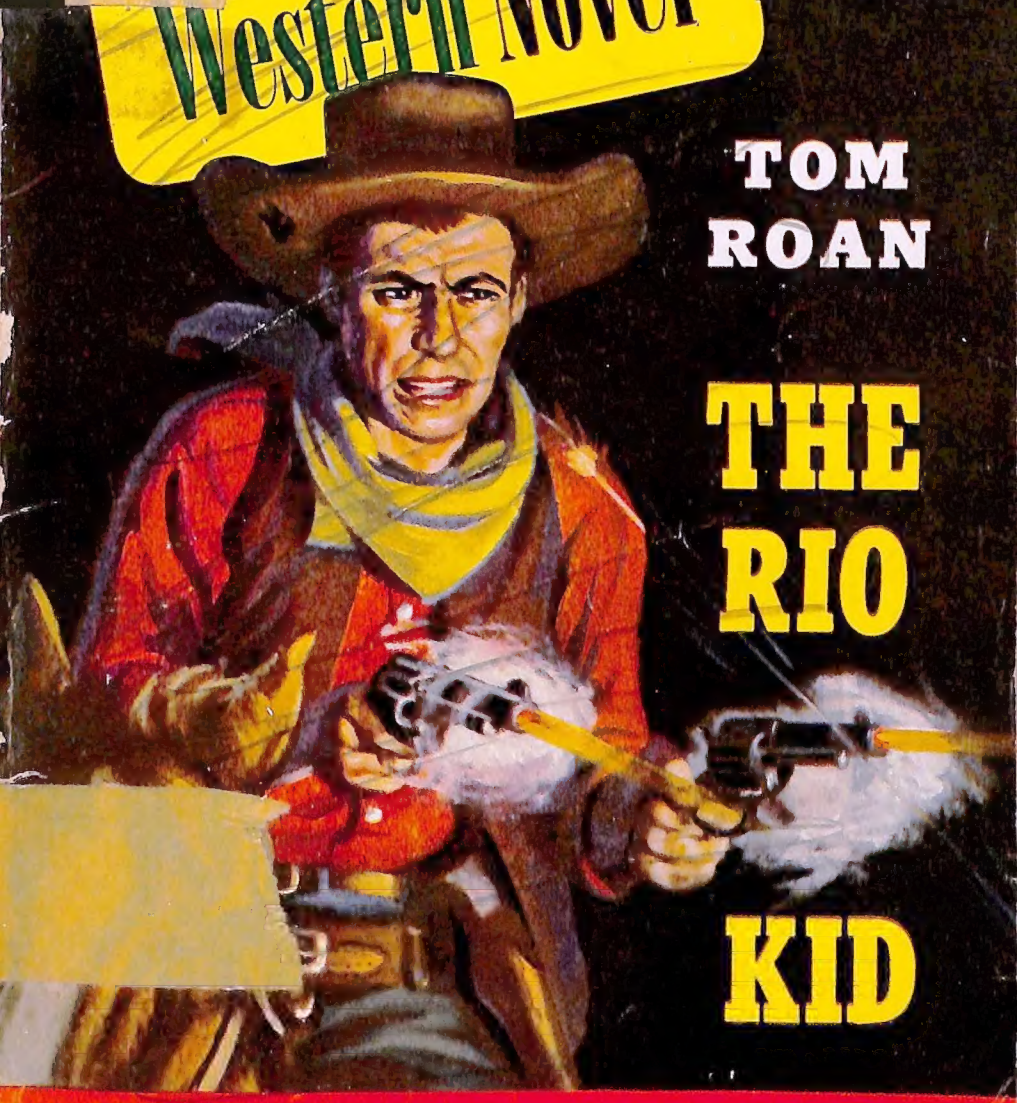
FIGHTING Western Novel

25 CENTS
NO. 35

A HILLMAN PUBLICATION



TOM ROAN

THE RIO KID

ABRIDGED FROM THE ORIGINAL EDITION TO SPEED THE ACTION

THE RIO KID

By
TOM
ROAN

★ A story of the glorious, gun-fighting West when bad-men rode the trails; when boisterous miners farmed the hills for gold, and "painted lilies" of the frontier gambling halls danced to the tune of wailing fiddles and the whispery jingle of many an outlaw's spurred heels.

★ A tale of a train robbery in the wild Wyoming hills, and of the good bad-man who stepped aboard "her saddle to see how high she flies"; a story of fighting men, a swashbuckling bandit; of a battle to death with a posse; an aging gunman's love for a stolen youth.

★ The story of a youth who grew to manhood on a gun-trail to become the most glamorous and deadly of the deadly; a youth who lived to right a wrong and find The One Woman, and who took her like the wild hellion he was when he found her.

NOVEL SELECTIONS, Inc. • New York

THE RIO KID

By TOM ROAN

ABRIDGED FROM THE ORIGINAL EDITION TO SPEED THE ACTION

Copyright, 1935, by Godwin, Publishers

All rights reserved by **NOVEL SELECTIONS, INC.**

PRINTED IN

THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

1

IT WAS a dark, dark valley, so utterly black and awesomely still there under the mid-August sky with its hurrying billows of slow-tumbling storm clouds it was like a yawning, bottomless pit in the earth. Deep-purple chains of mountains, standing in a giant horseshoe, almost circled it, the lofty peaks and shaggy crags to northward so high they seemed to pierce the clouds and rear on endlessly away above them. In their mighty curve the ridges and hills sloped away to southward, vanishing at last on the rim of an immense tableland dotted with jack-pined knolls.

"Old Two-Gun Dave" Steel—the thick-chested, bushy-headed leader of the eight riders who had halted like ghost horsemen on the trail behind him—slowly slumped back in his fine old Spanish saddle. He sent a stream of tobacco spittle squirting out of the side of his mouth, cocked his black-Stetsoned head to one side, and sat there listening. A big man of somewhere close to fifty, with a short-clipped beard as shiny and black as a crow's wing, two small, beady-blue eyes and thick, rolled-up and rolled-down lips, Two-Gun Dave Steel always listened, always took careful note of every sound before riding in on a job.

For five minutes more he sat there, a squashed-down figure in his old saddle, his head cocking from side to side. With a final shake of his shoulders he straightened. A faint sound, like the cluck of a hen, came to him. His Roman-nosed sorrel moved, urged forward by a gouge of a big pair of rusty rowels, and he was going on with his riders following him with tight hands gripping their reins.

Thirty minutes of winding and twisting along the blackness of the trail brought them to the valley floor. Having looked over "the lay of the land" several days before and made his plans for the "get-away," Steel swung his sorrel abruptly to the left, leaving the trail. He led the way through dense clouds of berry bushes, and came to a trickling waterway. The horses were allowed a few moments to drink, and Steel was moving on, spurring the sorrel into a gallop at the foot of a gentle rise that led toward a pine-covered knoll.

"Gettin' near the spot, boys." His voice was a grunt as the other riders drew up in a close half-circle behind him. "I reckon there ain't much more palaverin' to do. Little Dave watches the hosses. Fate handles the telegraph operator an' takes care of all that end. Gyp an' Stark'll take the engine, Gyp from the side whut the water tank's on, Stark from the other side. Smith an' Steve'll look atter the passenger coaches, doin' a little of their right spry an' real fancy shootin' up an' down 'em just to sorter keep the curious minded backed up an' gentlewised so that the rest of us won't be bothered while we're slappin' the works to the express car.

"Don't kill anybody." A stream of tobacco juice split the wind from the corner of his mouth with a slight *p-futt.* " 'Tain't needed. Only young heads make blunders like that these days on jobs whut ain't loaded down with a lota guards. The Westbound won't be carryin' 'em, 'less it's a sorter last move; an' shootin' up the boys anywhere in the train ain't a thing but nervousness. Ever'body aboard'll be so scared their teeth'll rattle. Now, start yore scatterin', movin' nice an' gentle until yuh git to the meetin' point. Little Dave," he seemed to slump lower in his saddle, "come here to yore pappy, kid."

As the other riders appeared to slope away, moving as gently as shadows melting into the shadows, a mere boy gouged a long-legged, awkward-looking red pony with his spurs, and rode forward. He was not yet ten, a grey-eyed youngster with dark, curling hair, a freckled button of a nose and a mouth that seemed too full of teeth. He was dressed cowpuncher fashion from high-heeled boots, black Angora chaps, a soft grey flannel shirt and a flaming red neckerchief to a light tan Stetson. Around his middle hung a cartridge belt, spotted with silver dots and sagging at his right hip from the weight of a small-calibre six-shooter. From his saddle horn, fastened by a colt-skin strap, swung a .32-20 Winchester carbine.

"Skeered, son?" Old Two-Gun Dave glanced down at the boy from the corners of his eyes. "Feel kinda trembly? Lips sorter dry an' not much spit in yore mouth?"

"Hell, no," whispered the youngster, twisting himself a little to one side in his saddle and looking up at the man. "I feel damn good, pa."

"Yo've got a heap o' sand, little fella," admired the man, chuckling a low sound that seemed to come from the bottom of his stomach. "More'n most men."

"I shoot a heap sight better'n a lot of the ducks ridin' with yuh," complained the boy as they rode on, "an' I ride a hell of a lot better. I still don't see why I've got to set 'way back an' watch the broncs while yuh gallinippers git all the fun."

"Uh-huh, 'tain't plum fair, I reckon, but yo're growin', son, an'—"

"Yeah, I know what yo're goin' to say," there was a grumble like the growl of a pup in the boy's tone, "an' I've hearn it all before. It seems to me that I'm spendin' a hell of a lot of good time just growin'."

They came to a break in the ridge. Far below and to eastward a green light burned like a dragon's eye in the darkness. Beneath it glowed a pale square of yellow that marked the dusty panes of an end-window in a lonely little telegraph office. Old Two-Gun Dave studied both lights. As he had mentioned up there on the knoll, Fate Grant would look after the telegraph office, with a gun in his hand and a mask over his face. Fate had been carefully in-

structed; he would know how to go about the business of putting the telegraph instruments out of commission.

With a *p-futt* Steel rode on with the boy beside him. They found a trail, and made their way downward. At last they were crossing a railroad track. The yellow and the green light seemed to glare at them for a moment like watchful eyes, then both lights were gone with Old Two-Gun Dave leading the way on into the denser blackness of low-spreading cottonwoods. Somewhere close at hand a river gurgled.

"This way," grunted the man to the boy as he swung to the left. "An' careful now, son. We're close to the place."

They pulled up in a big, saucerlike bowl of rocks on a little knoll surrounded by low trees. The first to arrive at the given place, they slipped quietly out of their saddles. Thunder rolled far away like an army of rumbling wagons. A faint glare of quivering light crossed the sky. Two-Gun Dave Steel lifted his head and sniffed the air.

"Gonna rain shore 'nuff," he whispered to the boy. "I smell 'er a-comin', Little Dave. Ever'thing's in our favor. A big downpour an' a clean wash-away of all signs of the trail we'll leave. Lady Luck, somehow, allus did set on my shirt-tail, son."

His men were appearing a short time later. They had ranged the valley up and down, poking into every blob of shadow. With almost the silence of moles now, fully satisfied that everything was clear for the job ahead of them, they came stealing in out of the gloom, and eased themselves down from their saddles.

As if guided to the spot by another quivering flare of light in the sky, Fate Grant was the last man to arrive. He was a tall and thin man, his face dark and skeleton-like. A hairy wart grew on the left side of his long, thin nose. His eyes were smoky-black, deep-set in their sunken sockets.

"Took a little time to look the brass-pounder over, Two-Gun," he whispered, nodding toward the telegraph office. "Old blister. Even the door to his office is part open. All I've got to do is to walk in an' poke my gun on him."

"Show a heap of pains with 'im, Fate," warned Steel. "I've never had to kill a man yit on one of these jobs. He's apt to be a nervous old rooster an' try to do somethin' right unbrainly an' childish."

"If he shows fight I'll just knock hell outa 'im with the barrel of my gun."

"Uh-huh. As good a way as any if yuh just have to do it," growled Steel. "But be shore," his eyes narrowed in the darkness, "to *hit light,* an' be shore them instruments can't be used. We want as much time for the get-away as we can git."

"This ain't my first job, Two-Gun!" The hint of a snarl suddenly twisted Grant's lips. "I always know what to do. When I get to

where I don't, I'll quit these damned jobs. I won't come to you for schoolin'."

"Yuh maybe wouldn't do that, Fate Grant. Yuh an' me ain't eggzackly gonna quarrel, Fate, if I can he'p it. But yuh allus wanta shoot off somethin' smartlike at ever'thing we go at here of late. The rest of the boys don't like it. They ain't never liked it; I don't like it, Fate." A strange, whisper-softness had come into Old Two-Gun's voice. "If it wasn't for me an' a few of the boys, yuh might still be settin' in jail in Crooked Leg, waitin' there for 'em to break yore gawd-damned neck for the chicken-livered killin' of a pore old Chinaman in a laundry hold-up. We took yuh out of that one-hoss jail in Crooked Leg, in the good old-fashioned style."

"This ain't no—no place to pick a row, Two-Gun!" Grant had taken a step backward, his hands lifting and his voice faltering. "It won't do."

"Yo're right!" There was positive agreement in Steel's voice. "It ain't the place, but I git damned tired of yore lip. It's them mean black eyes whut can't look straight at a man whut makes yuh think yuh know it all—"

A far-away sound, slipping through the night like a lost chord, halted him. He whirled, cocking his head to one side. The rest of the gang had instantly come to attention.

"She's a-tootin' her horn, pa," whispered the boy. "Yuh better git ready to step aboard of her saddle an' see how high she flies."

"Hush!" There was a rasp in Old Two-Gun Dave Steel's voice now. "Lis'en."

Thunder-wagons again rolled far, far away. A flickering flare of lightning again danced on distant clouds. Faint and far, another noise seemed to join in, a whispering flutter of sound. Clearer now, not to be mistaken, the lonesome wail of a locomotive, coming like a rocket, echoed softly down through Crazy Horse Valley and died away in the hills.

"It's 'er, the Westbound," nodded Steel. "Comin' like a bat outa hell! Git ready, boys. Remember, *no killin'*. Yuh won't have to kill. Fate, yuh still wanta handle yore part of it, I reckon?"

"Er—yeah, shore, Two-Gun!"

"Then git goin'. Little fella," Old Two-Gun whirled suddenly and had taken a half-dozen steps forward. He placed his hand on the boy's shoulder, patting it fondly, "Yuh stay put, son. There'll be a lota fireworks goin' off an' a heap of lead slingin', but it's to be most for show. I know my job. Don't git nervous. Pa'll be back soon as the job's done. But just in case somethin' might happen, somethin' none of us foresee," he had suddenly dropped to one knee and was speaking in a whisper with his lips close to the boy's right ear, "yuh ride my hoss outa here to-night. Cut the wind for the first town. In

the cantle of that saddle, sewed in it, yuh see, you'll find somethin' to yore interest. It'll tell yuh whut to do."

He was gone then, a big, broad-shouldered thing, batwings of his old black chaps flopping, long, ivory-handled six-shooters rocking at his hips. Like hounds trailing close to the heels of their master the rest of the men were following him.

2

THE HEADLIGHT grew stronger. Out of the darkness shadowy objects loomed and grew into their rightful shapes. The wet sides of the water tank caught the light, and gleamed like a mirror. Through the trees the boy in the rocks caught a glimpse of the telegraph office, and saw that it was an old box-car without wheels, placed on ties at the side of the railroad with a cindered walk between it and the tracks. Right in front of it, braced against it with straps of iron, was a tall, white pole on which the green light gleamed.

The roar of the Westbound was growing into a storm. Its strong, fierce whistle was moaning, the blasts rolling away down the valley and up the hills; then came the chatter and screeching of brake-shoes biting against spinning wheels, and a long line of lights, led by the monster-shape of the locomotive. A panting, throbbing thing, the engine seemed to ease up to the old water tank.

And now action! A shot cracked like a voice of doom. There was a hoarse yell of sudden fear. A voice rasped out an order; a coal-scoop rattled on a steel apron inside the locomotive's cab; a door slammed somewhere; a man with a lantern jerked into being. There was a volley of shots, and the man had dropped the lantern, and had gone diving back into the vestibule of a passenger coach like a leaping monkey.

"Robbery! Robbery!" wailed a voice. *"Robbery!"*

Smith Hall and Steve Cage, two grinning hellions out there in the darkness, had now started warming it up. Like stabs of lightning, their six-shooters were throwing their shots down the side of the train. Someone thrust a small pistol out a half-open window, firing a single shot almost straight upward. The roar of a big .45 in Steve Cage's right hand sent a bullet crashing through the glass close to the pistol that had fired its puny shot, and a yell of terror came from the coach.

"Open 'er up, yuh bozos!" The boy in the rocks knew that voice. Old Two-Gun Dave was knocking on the door of the express car with the butt of one of his guns. "It's dynamite under yore tail 'f yuh don't!"

"There's fifty men out there!" screeched a voice from somewhere. "The—the whole country's covered with them!"

As if for nothing more than to have the rank excitement of taking some part in it, women were screaming now. The boy in the rocks grinned when he thought of what Old Two-Gun Dave had said.

"When the wimmin start to yowl, yuh can know the men back in the coaches are gittin' that sick-at-the-belly look in their faces. An' that'll mean that there won't be much trouble from that end of the bargain."

Bang! Bang! Bang-Bang! Smith Hall and Steve Cage were certainly warming it up now. *Bang! Bang-Bang-Bang!* Another lanterned figure had appeared, dropping off the rear platform of the train. A bullet slapped into the slag close at his feet, glanced, struck one of the rails with a sharp whang! and buzzed away in the darkness. Down went the lantern with a bouncing crash. The man who had held it turned with a yell, and started running eastward along the tracks. *Bang! Bang-Bang—Whang!*

"Bring up the dynamite, boys!" Two-Gun Dave's voice rolled like a drum now. The boy in the rocks grinned, and wondered if Dave Steel ever had seen a stick of dynamite. "I'm tired of waitin' on the gents. Uh-huh, that's the ticket; scatter it out under the car so's ever'body inside'll git the full benefit outa it!"

"Wait!" A voice, sounding as though it was muffled, came from inside the express car. "Don't—don't blow us up, mister!"

"In five seconds more!" roared Old Two-Gun Dave's voice, "yuh git blowed clear to the moon 'f that door ain't open.

There was a grating sound, a sharp screech of moving wheels. The express car door had opened. With their hands thrust above their heads two men stood in the opening with a row of lights behind them. The boy in the rocks saw Old Two-Gun Dave move into the light with his face covered with a big, black handkerchief.

"No tricky business, yuh dudes!" he was warning. "I'm not a hairpin whut'll take any pleasure a-tall in killin' yuh, but I will blow yuh 'f yuh try pullin' any monkey business."

Not until a spurred heel sounded close to him did Little Dave, the only name the boy in the rocks could ever remember, take his gaze from the express car door. With a jerk he was on his feet, whirling.

"Look out, yuh damned little fool!" hissed the voice of Fate Grant. "It—it's me!"

"Oh, it—it's yuh!" The boy expelled a long breath, his six-shooter lowering and going back into its holster. "I didn't know it was yuh, Fate. Whutnahell are yuh gonna do?"

"Got to get my horse!" Fate Grant's voice seemed ridden with some terrible fear. "That—that damned telegraph operator got—got away. I've got to catch him, little un."

He was on a horse then, swinging quickly into the saddle. As he whirled the horse, jamming both spurs into the animal's flanks, the boy recognized the Roman-nosed sorrel.

"Wait, Fate! That's pa's bronc!"

"Damn you!" To the utter surprise of the boy one of Fate Grant's six-shooters had leaped out of its holster. The weapon swept upward, then downward. There was a roar and a blinding flash of light, so close it seemed that the blaze of fire raked the side of the boy's face. The boy staggered backward, his hands going to his eyes. "You and your wise ways!"

Fate Grant was gone then, the horse appearing to fling him away. The boy wiped his eyes. Again the little six-shooter was out of its holster, but only the dying rumble of the Roman-nosed sorrel's hoofs came to him.

"Slope an' slope fast, boys!" It seemed but a minute now until Old Two-Gun Dave Steel was back from the job, a burly figure hurrying in among the rocks with a heavy canvas sack over his shoulder. "We've got to scatter. There's another train comin', an' it's comin' like roarin' hell. Where—where's my bronc, son?"

"Fate Grant took 'im, pa! He—"

"Huh? What's that?" Old Two-Gun Dave whirled so quickly he almost fell. "What are yuh sayin', boy?"

In a few seconds the boy had told him what had happened.

"It's a double-cross, Two-Gun!" hissed Gyp Marshall and Stark Corbey in almost the same breaths. "No man with one eye an' half sense would trust that fella!"

"Lis'en!" snorted another old outlaw. *"Lis'en!"* He held up his hand for just an instant. "Hear that other train? A-comin' from the West, gents! *We gotta go!"*

"Shore!" There was a snarl in Steel's voice. "The rest can wait. Yuh boys better change any plans yo've made for yoreselves. Lis'en. Jump 'round me close. Let's change the meetin'-place." His voice had dropped to a tense, breath-like whisper as the men crowded close to him. Let's make it the Sonora Rose's, down on the Mex Border. Got it? Good! An' lis'en," he caught two of the men as they started to whirl toward their horses, "if anybody runs into Fate Grant, shoot 'im like he was a damned snake."

They were in the saddles a few moments later. Down the tracks, running like a cyclone, an engine with two box-cars was coming. Riding Fate Grant's black gelding, Old Two-Gun Dave, with Little Dave right at his heels, led the way, swinging straight into the hills and knolls to southward. As they reached a high hill they saw the engine and the two box-cars come to a halt in the glare of the West-bound's headlight. Men and horses came tumbling out of the cars.

"All right, boys!" Steel whirled in his saddle, looking at his men. "Now's time for the split-up. Don't git caught. Play yore game

hard an' fast. I'll be at the place where I said, or right close. In case I'm not right there waitin', The Rose'll take yuh in an' shoot the word to me. Git goin'. I've never rid with better men."

Rain came later. Old Two-Gun Dave Steel held out his hands, feeling of the water with intense satisfaction and chuckling as the boy galloped along beside him on the long-legged red pony. Then, a short time later, Steel was pulling to a halt. Fate Grant's horse was going suddenly lame. Steel was out of the saddle, examining the animal's legs with the rain beating down on his back. In a few minutes he was climbing back into his saddle.

"Got it, damn 'im!" he snarled. He held up something in the darkness, felt of it, and slipped it in the bosom of his old flannel shirt. "A wire, such a little un yuh could hardly find it. Tied tight above the left front hoof. It's all clear now. Fate Grant spilled the beans when he went to the telegraph office. That's why he was last to meet in the rocks, damn 'im! An' fixin' his hoss so's he'd go lame on me! Huh! An' old-timer like me! Hell!"

"Whut did he think he'd git outa doin' a deal like that?"

"Just a rat!" snarled Steel. "Plain an' ever'day rat! Maybe he thinks he might git he'p to ease him outa that Crooked Leg job. He killed that old Chink up there in Crooked Leg, shot 'im an' robbed 'im of eight hundred dollars. I didn't believe it at first. If I had I wouldn't a-gone to all the trouble takin' 'im outa that one-hoss cottonwood jail. But from now on, son, we've gotta watch our step. We don't know whut's comin'. Still," *p-futt,* "I'll git us through, thick or thin. I ain't got a doubt a-tall in beatin' any posse gang that ever blowed outa hell. All they want is money; all they'll be trailin' me for is money, a chance to pick up somethin' without gittin' down an' workin' for it. They'd take it just like I take it, only they just ain't got the natural born guts a man needs to pistol flag a train an' take the cash, man for man. I've killed squirts like that, killed 'em when I didn't plum have to kill 'em. They was huntin' blood, an' when a man hunts my blood, then an' there I git to wantin' to see the color of his blood."

"An' ain't we gotta change our plans, pa?"

"All the change whut there'll be is done made," growled the man. "I done that back there in the rocks. Nobody but yuh an' me knows whut my plans are. Not even Gyp an' Stark. I don't know anybody else's. 'Tain't my way. I never tell mine. I never ask the other fella."

It was still raining at dawn. Old Two-Gun Dave Steel and the boy were across the great tableland now, riding through low, pine-covered hills. In the pouring rain they came to a deserted ranch-house with tumble-down corrals and a huge barn with one side of the roof blown off.

"Grant ain't never tried to pick yuh, has he, son?" Two-Gun

Dave looked quizzically at the boy. "Never asked questions 'bout how we was to do this or that?"

"Never had a chance, pa. I was allus close to yuh."

"An' I reckon yo're seein' the light by now of why I wanted yuh close, Little Dave," nodded the man as he eased himself out of his saddle. "I'm old at some things. Runnin' off at the mouth never paid a man. Git down. Here's where we make our switch. The broncs an' the wagon are waitin'."

By noon, Fate Grant's saddler and the long-legged pony were turned loose on the open range, and Steel and the boy were grinding along in a lumbering old covered wagon drawn by two big, shaggy horses. In the double bottom of the wagon's bed rode the money from the hold-up—a hundred and thirty thousand dollars, mostly in currency.

The old Two-Gun Dave had changed. Gone was his black beard, his big Stetson, his boots and his chaps. Dark glasses now covered his eyes. His six-shooters were not in evidence. His coat was long, black and frock-tailed. On his head perched a flat black hat, and on the seat between him and the boy lay a big, leather-bound Bible.

"I do the talkin'. Don't yuh butt in, Little Dave, 'f we meet anybody. They can search us or talk all they please. I'll git us by, come whut will or whut won't, son."

During the afternoon it ceased raining. They made camp deep in the hills beside a gushing stream of water pouring out at the foot of a cliff of rocks. As their campfire gleamed and the shadows of night settled a group of horsemen appeared in the outer darkness.

"Who are yuh an' where are yuh goin', yuh folks there at the fire?" hailed a voice. "Speak up an' speak plain!"

As Old Two-Gun Dave stood up in his long coat and his flat black hat he caught the outlines of a muzzle of a rifle pointed toward him.

"We are Pilgrims carryin' The Light into the wilderness!" answered Two-Gun Dave. "Who are thou who comest to us from the darkness? Demount an' hear The Word! Verily, verily, I say unto ye, hear ye The Word! Everlastin' fire an' the brimstone of Hell awaits thee, thou sinner, thou who creepest about in the shadows of the night, thou—"

"Let's go!" growled a voice in the darkness. "It's one of them half-loco sky pilots. If we get down we'll never get away from 'im."

"Uh-huh, it's what I was a-thinkin', Samp. Let's shove, boys."

"Hear, ye! Hear, ye!" bawled Old Two-Gun Dave as the horses whirled and started galloping away. "Woe unto ye who lis'eneth not when The Trumpet is soundin'—"

"Go blow yore bugle at the moon!" yelled the voice of some cowboy-posseman above the sudden roar of cannonading hoofs. "May be the man up there'll lis'en!"

3

FOR A LONG, wearisome week swarms of posse-men hounded the rattling old wagon. Time after time Old Two-Gun Dave Steel stood up and preached to men. One night eight heavily armed, reward-hungry bandit-hunters made camp with him. Old Two-Gun Dave lulled them to sleep with his battered fiddle while the boy—as level-eyed and as watchful as a hawk—thumped-thumped on the banjo. From the burly, black-whiskered leader of the men Old Two-Gun Dave gleaned a little news of what had taken place in Crazy Horse Valley.

"Three of the gents what took part in the hold-up was killed next mornin' right after daylight," had explained the posse-man as he and the Old Two-Gun sat cross-legged on a boulder a few yards above the dying camp-fire after the others had been lulled into their blankets. "One of the gang, yuh see, tipped off the telegrapher of what was gonna happen. That was just a little while 'fore the Westbound pulled in. The telegrapher spun the news on to Snowshoe Point. Snowshoe Point, bein' only about thirteen miles away, got up a posse quick as powder. A freight was there on the sidin'. They cut the engine an' a couple of box-cars loose, an' went hell-bent for Crazy Horse. Come nigh gettin' there an' catchin' the bunch right in the job of overhaulin' the Westbound. But when they looks 'round for the fella what'd spilled the news, he's gone. Got scared, I reckon."

"Some pore fella, no doubt," mumbled Old Two-Gun Dave in a sorrowful tone, "whut felt the need of The Light an' was tryin' to git back to it. Didn't he tell 'em nothin' more?"

"Said there was seven in the gang," the posse-man went on. "Even left a note givin' the general direction in which six of 'em would go. The folks at the train, howsomever, say they think there was nine. They say there was eight at the train, includin' the gent what slipped this tale to the telegrapher, an', of course, there'd a-been somebody back in the clear watchin' their hosses. That would make nine, wouldn't it?"

"Looks thataway, leastwise from what I've read here in my book of how fellas like that go at a job. Whut way did the fella whut talked to the telegrapher say the six men would go, mister?"

"Two east, two west, an' two north. The posse-boys struck three goin' north-west. There was one hell of a fight, parson. The posse-boys jammed 'em in a blind canyon. The train robbers opened right up, like fightin' was their business. They got five of the posse-boys 'fore yuh couldt bat yore eye. Damn nigh wiped 'em out complete."

"Did they git any names," *p-futt,* "of who the bad fellas was that was killed in that blind canyon?"

"Hell, parson, no! Why, them fellas was what I reckon yuh would call plum bad. They died fightin', not talkin' and introducin' 'emselves!"

"Powerful bad!" *P-futt.* Another stream of tobacco spittle cut the wind like a brown arrow flying straight into a clump of buffalo grass. "It's more puzzlin' than I can make out." *P-futt-futt.*

But there was something about it that he could make out. Fate Grant, for some reason, had not told of Little Dave. Old Two-Gun Dave wondered why.

"Fate Grant's got somethin' deep up his sleeve," he told the boy the next day as they rolled on through the hills after halting for more than an hour at a sheep camp where Old Two-Gun had stood on his wagon-tongue, roaring and waving his arms in a mighty effort to "spread The Light" to a group of Basque herders who could scarcely understand a half-dozen words of English. "I can't quite figure it, son. It seems, though, that he sorter wanted to protect me. Now why? What would he want me to git away for? Why would he want the rest killed off an' me to go on with the money? Damned 'f it don't look like the codger was a-tryin' to make it plum safe sailin' for yuh an' me; an' Gawd knows Fate Grant would have reason to like me less than the other boys."

"I never liked that man, pa," confessed the boy. "I thought yuh was goin' to a heap o' trouble over nothin' when yuh took 'im outa that Crooked Leg jail-house."

Something told them they were being followed. On high knolls and from the backs of tall ridges, Old Two-Gun Dave stood upon the green wagon seat to look back over the country. Once he caught the glimpse of a horseman dropping like a moving dot over the rim of a distant hill.

"Cowpuncher, no doubt," he growled as he moved back into his seat. "A man can git the willies 'f he don't watch 'imself."

A week later, winding down a deep canyon trail one afternoon at sunset, they saw a big covered wagon almost hidden by cottonwoods on the bank of a silvery stream below. Just as darkness was settling, Old Two-Gun Dave's wagon was going in under the trees; and it was here that they met the Martins—Steve, Grace and little Mary.

"On our way to Texas," explained Steve Martin after a round of introductions had come from both sides. "For my health we decided to drive through. I got down this summer with a case of typhoid in the Bitter Root country of Montana. It almost knocked the props from under me."

He was a tall man, less than thirty, with a thin, sallow face. Little Mary was seven and like a doll, a very delicate doll with long,

golden curls, red lips and sparkling blue eyes. At first Little Dave was afraid of her, afraid to get close; afraid to speak. It was Grace Martin who smoothed the way. From somewhere in the dim past the half-fanciful memory of a woman had always haunted Little Dave—a tall and slender woman, as graceful as a young willow, with a tumbly cloud of curly black hair, deep-blue eyes and perfect white teeth flashing in a smile. Grace Martin was like her. Somehow the boy seemed to remember her voice. Never had he been able to place it, but he had heard it over and over, the same voice, sad and low, sometimes sobbing and sobbing in the dead of night.

"A heap o' times I heard a voice, pa," he had confided to Old Two-Gun Dave. "A woman's voice, pa. But it ain't of no woman like the kind yuh go to see ever'time we hit some town. It's a gentle voice, pa. Sometimes her eyes is full o' tears, pa. I sometimes see 'em (I reckon I'm asleep an' dreamin' then) wide an' wild, the purty woman holdin' out her arms to me, an' somebody a-cussin' her an' a-holdin' her back. When I see her like that I sometimes wake up a-cryin' like I was only a damned kid. I wonder whut makes me like that, pa?"

"It—it's natrual." There was always a stoppage in Old Two-Gun Dave Steel's voice when he tried to answer those questions. Always he looked off and afar. "It—it's natural for us to dream. No—nobody understands it. Just don't think about it. It—it ain't good for yuh."

But the moment Little Dave looked at Grace Martin, he thought of that other woman.

"My, but you are a nice little man!" Grace Martin had cried. At once she had dropped on her knees beside him, and had placed a soft white arm around him, hugging him up close.

Never had he known before that a woman could hurt a man so! Life was yet a mystery, vast and sometimes terrible. He, who was not yet ten, who had seen men die, quickly and unexpectedly, sometimes gasping and squirming; sometimes with a red foam on their lips and gurgling oaths staggering from their throats.

"But—but I'm a-skeered of her, pa," he whispered that night as he lay in the blankets, snuggled close to Two-Gun Dave Steel. "I don't know whut it is. She—she's so Gawd-awful purty, pa, but—but she scares the livin' hell outa me, somehow."

"Yuh—yuh just ain't used to wimmin, son." For some reason Two-Gun Dave Steel's voice sounded husky. "Not her kind. I mean. Yo'll be all right in a little while."

But day after day found the wagons rolling on together. Grace Martin drove Steve Martin's shaggy buckskins. The boy rode on one side of her and Mary on the other while Steve Martin rode with Old Two-Gun Dave. At night they camped by whispering streams, with the smoke and the odor of their wood fire climbing in slow-

spiraling ribbons among the trees. With one arm around Mary and the other around Little Dave, Grace Martin sang to them after the supper pots and pans had been washed and while the camp fire crackled and the blazes danced in fantastic figures at her feet. Sometimes Little Dave brought out his banjo. He was shy at first, but later he and Old Two-Gun made rough, faltering music while Grace Martin sang.

"There ain't never been a real purty thing in our lives until now, pa," had confessed Little Dave time after time. "Let's just stay with the Martins for ever, pa. Let's quit this loco business of hittin' trains an' robbin' banks 'round the country. Let's drive our wagon where they drive, an' when they stop we can stop with 'em. I don't like these things yo've been doin'. I reckon I ain't never liked 'em, pa. Somehow, I ain't never knowed it until now. Let's quit it an' do like the Martins do. Hell, Pa, they ain't a-skeered of nobody whut rides in or outa camp! It must be powerful nice to just sit back an' feel like that, to look at folks an' not have to figure how fast yuh can git yore gun."

"It would be nice," had agreed the old outlaw. "It would be mighty nice, 'specially for yuh, Little Dave, but we got a job to do. We got a place to go, I ain't never fooled a man yit. When the boys that are still alive in this deal git through to the Sonora Rose's place, they'll find me waitin' there with their part of the job. After that, son—well, I'm thinkin' mighty strong that we might rejine the Martins."

And on and on they rolled with the Martins, through the happy days and the happy nights, with only one dread in Little Dave's mind; and that was the dread of the coming day when they would swing away from the Martins and go on for the rest of their journey alone.

Old Two-Gun Dave was constantly thinking of it, too. Little Dave watched him, talked to him, and saw it in the old outlaw's face. For the first time since Little Dave could remember him the old man was not wearing his guns. The six-shooters, old and worn from hard service, rode in the wagon, and the Little Dave's six-shooter rode with them. The only weapon the Martins carried was an old single-barrel shotgun, a "bird-getter" for supper or breakfast when they camped where the game was plentiful.

"Tomorrow evenin', I reckon we'll have to divide trail with these folks, son," Old Two-Gun Dave told the boy one night as they lay in their blankets. "I hate to do it, knowin' how yuh feel, but it can't be' he'ped this time."

Far off the beaten trails, in a place rarely frequented by men, they were camped in Lost Wagon Train Canyon, a deep, valley-like gorge with towering walls of black rock on either side and a narrow stream sheltered by bushy cottonwoods in the center of it.

All the camp had gone to sleep except Little Dave. He lay there looking at the stars.

Little Dave heard something. It was the faintest tinkle of a sound, a creepingly soft jingle, like the careful movement of a spurred heel coming from somewhere in the dark blot of shadow beyond the wagons.

Old Two-Gun Dave Steel was snoring softly, but something must have warned him. With a start he sat up in his blankets, a big, attentive thing there in the light of the rising moon. He looked toward the wagons, instinctively feeling for his guns that—for the first time during his long, dangerous career—were not there in the blankets beside him. Then, as blinding and darting as a streak of lightning, a leaping gash of flame tore at him from the darkness, and the canyon appeared to quiver with the sudden jar of an exploding carbine.

With an oath Old Two-Gun Dave Steel made it to his feet, then he was falling, going down with a bullet through his head. Startled from a deep sleep, the Martins were literally flying out of their blankets. A scream cut the night. A hoarse cry of alarm came from Steve Martin, then a gashing flame lurched toward him and seemed to cut him in half. He whirled, sprawling, a dead man on his bed. Then the woman was up, clutching Mary and a blanket to her. Again that savage, lightning-like streak of fire made itself known in the blob of shadow beyond the wagon. A roar shook the canyon, a cry—like a long, mournful sob—came from Grace Martin. Mary screamed something, and then Grace Martin and Mary were falling, dropping across the already still form of Steve Martin. Both had been killed almost instantly and in cold blood by a single bullet that had pierced them through and through.

Like a scooting lizard Little Dave had gone out of the blankets. He darted in behind a tall wall of boulders. Never stopping until he was rods above the camp, he lay down under a thick cluster of brush.

"You thought I was dumb, huh, Two-Gun?" The harsh, bantering voice came out of the darkness, and the boy recognized it as the voice of Fate Grant. "Hell! I played you for a sucker, Two-Gun Dave! I fixed the deal, set the posses on the others, and I trailed you. I heard you make your plans with that kid, one night when you thought nobody was listenin'! I knew exactly what you were going to do. A man like me—a man with all my brains!—playing second fiddle in your string! Hell! Where's that kid?"

Fate Grant came out of the darkness then. For an hour he hunted among the rocks. Once he stood within three feet of the boy. He stood there, a six-shooter gripped in his hand, his dark, scowling eyes peering into the shadows. At last he turned, swore huskily, and hurried down to Old Two-Gun Dave Steel's wagon, disappearing inside it. The boy heard him ripping up boards. In a few minutes Grant re-

appeared. He carried a heavy canvas sack now and hurried off in the darkness to a waiting horse.

An hour passed. Little Dave had not moved. He was too old to the tricks a man—especially a man like Fate Grant—could play on another. He waited for another hour and slowly lifted his head. A horse snorted two or three hundred yards away out there in the darkness and someone cursed in a low voice. The boy dropped back to his place in the brush. Not until dawn came—and not until he had made certain that Fate Grant had given up finding him and was gone away—did he venture out of his place of hiding.

He walked to Old Two-Gun Dave Steel. Old Two-Gun Dave looked so stark and still, lying there with his face covered with blood. The boy left him abruptly and walked on to the Martin bed. He took one look, and turned quickly away as if some terrible hurt inside of him was about to burst his heart.

In the cold grey light of the dawn a breeze had come up, and high in the trees a sad, sad voice was singing. The boy turned to his wagon. He took out Old Two-Gun Dave's six-shooters, tied the clumsy belts around him, and sat down on the wagon tongue. He had cried at first, the tears rushing down, but his grey eyes were hard and cold now.

4

IT WAS years later that the same cold, spiritlessly grey eyes came again to look upon the scene in Lost Wagon Train Canyon. The old wagons were still there, bits of the harness lying on the doubletrees, and the empty, sun-curled shell of a collar hanging on a near-by boulder. Time had rotted down the wheels. Wind and the sun had reduced the cumbersome canvas tops to a few faded rags slow-swaying in the late-afternoon breeze.

As a man would step on sacred ground, the tall man in black—halted at the head of the seven hard-faced riders who had pulled rein at a respectful distance behind him—eased himself out of the fine saddle of a handsome black mare with all the markings of thoroughbred racing stock. He was lean and straight, with level eyes, roaching dark hair, and a mouth that few men had ever seen smile; a cruel-lipped sinister man who had grown up among the dives south of the Texas Border, a deadly-dangerous man to whom the toughest of the toughs paid homage. In Lonesome Lou's—one of the worst dives on the river—he had killed his bad-man before he was fifteen. As a mere youth he had fought through three revolutions; had distinguished himself time after time under fire as a born soldier and a horseman. He spoke the border Spanish even better than his own mother tongue, and lived very much alone. For the want of a name men called him The Rio Kid.

His fine black hat came off of his head. He held it in a black-gloved hand. As if he was not at all conscious of the watching men behind him, he moved forward to the long mound of stones. For a long five minutes he stood there looking down. His hands were clasped behind his back. His head was lowered. If the men behind him had thought he believed in God, they would have thought that The Rio Kid was praying. But suddenly he was turning, and his mouth had become a tight crack and his eyes were two glinty streaks beneath the puckered dark brows.

"All right!" He spoke in a voice so curt it was like the bite of a whip as he swung into his saddle. "We ride on, but each man of you," the glinty eyes were looking back over his shoulder, "take off your hat as you ride by this spot!"

They had no idea where he was going. For days The Rio Kid had scarcely spoken to them save for a short, snapped-out answer of "Yes!" or "No!" In the party behind him there was "Whistling Hank," tall, old grey-bearded and lank, the top of his left ear lopped off by the stroke of a knife, the right one only a shrivelled button that had once been ground to shreds by the teeth of a dying killer one night in a fight in Dago John's Cantina del Rio. And there was "Spooky Jim," the one-eyed giant with his wild red hair and bushy beard—a devil for women, whisky, dice and cards; and "Big Mike" Logan, as large as Spooky Jim, American, Russian, Finn and Greek; and "Choctaw Charley," the half-breed from Oklahoma; and "Tom the Piper," the full-blooded Osage who would never give up his Indian garb and who always rode with an eagle feather fastened in his scalplock and spinning in the wind. Bringing up the rear, riding to themselves as they had been doing for days, trailed the Jefferson brothers, Walt and Zack, two chunky, round-faced men with short, reddish beards and mean, beady-brown eyes, each a man with a history of blood longer than his arm. In all the border dives from the Pacific Ocean to the Gulf of Mexico, The Rio Kid could not have picked a harder, meaner crew.

He had told them not a thing; he had merely said that he wanted them, had named the night and the meeting-place. On the given night they had been there. In the vernacular of the West they had come heeled to the eyes, each man wearing a six-shooter at either hip, his cartridge belts sagging, and a carbine hanging from straps on his saddle. Their horses were the pick of the country, long-legged, fast-traveller brutes, good enough for anybody's race. The Rio Kid had not questioned their ownership.

"As to your past I do not give a damn!" Wide-legged, thumbs hooked over his belts, he had looked them arrogantly in the eyes that night in the dim candlelight of the long, black-beamed old living-room of the deserted *hacienda* in the heart of a wilderness of brush and low trees a few miles south of the Rio Grande. "As to what you will do when you ride with me I will have everything to say about it.

I will take no back talk from a man among you. I will tell you what I want to tell you. Until now my affairs and your affairs have never crossed on common ground. You are killers and robbers, each one of you with a price on his head. Where I am going there is money. The town is full of women. Some are good ones, no doubt, but a hell of a lot of your own kind are there. If you ride with me you can have your fill of them."

Old Whistling Hank, the usual spokesman for the lot, had been the first to answer The Rio Kid.

"Yuh needn't have no worryin' pains, Rio. We ain't eggzackley what the laws north an' south of the Rio Grande call perfectly gentle folks. Our ways are kinda stormy, I reckon yuh might say, but when a man like yuh leads us, we'll lis'en when yuh sing."

Many days later, deep in the towering Rockies of Western Montana, The Rio Kid was leaving them far up in a black canyon with mile-high walls reared up at either hand. With the men dropping out of their saddles to sprawl on their backs in the shade of a giant cottonwood to rest and wait while their horses grazed in the deep grass along the banks of an icy stream, The Rio Kid rode on up the canyon and rounded a bend in it. Out of sight now, he turned into the mouth of a narrow gorge and rode on.

5

THE WALLS of the forge narrowed. The Rio Kid virtually squeezed the mare through a gap between two giant boulders, and had come to a deep valley surrounded by towering cliffs and overhanging ledges.

In the distance, close to a mile away and slanting upward like a runway of some giant sled, a rock-slide loomed. At the left of the foot of it, almost hidden by jackpines, a log-and-stone hut with a sod roof covered with growing green grass sat against a cliff. Down in front of the hut was a low line of run-down corrals. Below the corrals, shaded by the same cottonwoods that had been there in the old days when The Rio Kid—then "Little Dave"— had ridden with Two-Gun Dave Steel, was a big, round pool of sparkling blue water, fed from a gushing stream pouring out at the foot of the rock-slide.

The Rio Kid rode on. A streak of pale-blue smoke, so thin it was scarcely detectable against the black rocks behind the little building, was coming from the rusty length of crooked stove-pipe thrust through the roof of the hut. A cautious man now, feeling that he was being watched, The Rio Kid kept a tight rein on the mare. When he was two hundred yards from the hut he pulled rein, and whistled a low, rolling sound. He waited a half-minute, and repeated the whistle.

After several minutes of silence an answer came from the direction of the hut, and The Rio Kid rode on. He came up to an old hitching-

rack in the shade of three big, bushy jackpines in front of the hut. Moving almost carefully, he slid out of his saddle, and dropped his reins. Then, with his thumbs hooked over the broad buckles of his belts, he walked slowly forward. When he was twenty feet from the hut the door was flung open, and two tall, thin-faced old men stood there regarding him with their right hands held behind them.

"Well?" A smile crossed The Rio Kid's face, a quick, quizzical little smile. "I guess you gallinippers don't know me, eh?"

"Gallinippers?" One of the old men had straightened. As if the word stirred awake some memory out of the long-buried past, his eyes had widened. A toothless mouth sagged open, then closed, the wrinkled lips twisted into a grin. "Why—why, Stark, it's Little Dave!"

The right hands of the old men appeared then, each jerking forward to jam a shiny-new six-shooter back into a black holster. The men came forward, one hobbling on a left foot turned askew from an old bullet-wound that had shattered the bones of the knee. The other, Stark Corbey, carried his shrivelled right arm with a crook in it at the elbow.

"Yuh little son-of-a-gun!" Gyp Marshall had his arm around The Rio Kid now. His wrinkled mouth was still widened into a grin, but his lips were trembling and something moist and shiny had appeared in his hollow eyes. "Why—why, damn yore soul!"

"Gallinippers, huh!" By this time Stark Corbey had reached The Rio Kid. He seized him by the shoulder, shaking him; and Stark Corbey's eyes had become moist and shiny.

"You both look about the same to me," lied The Rio Kid, placing his hands on their shoulders. "Meaner than a couple of bob-cats——"

"No, we don't son," grunted Marshall. "Yo're only tryin' to make us sorter forget what we've been through. Yuh can't fool us. But come on in where we can set down."

"Boy, oh boy, yuh shore have growed!" chuckled Corbey, rubbing The Rio Kid's back as they moved on toward the open door of the hut. "I just can't get over it!"

"If we only had a couple o' gallons of good red whisky an' yuh had yore banjo," bemoaned Marshall, hobbling on toward the doorway, "we'd shore make this old pocket in the hills ring with a song an' a tune!"

"Only the banjo would be out, Gyp." The corners of The Rio Kid's mouth quirked. "I haven't touched one since the night Two-Gun Dave Steel was killed in Lost Wagon Train Canyon."

Gyp Marshall and Stark Corbey halted, and looked at each other quickly. Their mouths sagged open, their eyes widened slightly, and their heads nodded, knowingly.

"We knowed somethin' had happened to Two-Gun," Marshall was telling The Rio Kid a short time later as they sat by a long old puncheon table on patched-together benches in the hut. "We never heard of 'm atter we parted that night in Crazy Hoss Valley. Who

"You know before I tell you, don't you?" The Rio Kid looked up quizzically, his eyes narrowing. "Or have a mighty fine idea?"

"Fate Grant, huh? Hell, of course it'd be a white-livered skunk like that! A posse never would a-got Two-Gun Dave!"

"So!" whispered Marshall, sharply.

A silence fell over them for a few minutes. The Rio Kid settled himself back against the wall near a cubby-hole of a window at the end of the table. He rolled a brown cigarette, licked it, and lighted it. With the cigarette hanging in one corner of his mouth, and his eyes half-closed, he began with his story.

Neither Stark Corbey nor Gyp Marshall moved. But as The Rio Kid finished the story of the four murders in Lost Wagon Train Canyon, they straightened gently, turning their heads to look at him.

"So?" whispered Marshall with infinite gentleness.

"An' that's why," nodded Corbey, "that we never hearn from Two-Gun Dave atter that night."

"I made it to Sonora Rose's place," went on The Rio Kid, "but The Rose had kids enough of her own. As I look back at it I'm glad she did have. She kicked me out before I had been there a month. I didn't have any money. I had to do the best I could. The old *padre* at the mission on the hill above The Rose's took me in and gave me enough to keep soul and body together for awhile. All I wanted, you see, was to wait around there for you fellows to come in. I wanted to tell you what had happened. If you had come, I probably would have trailed with you just as I had been trailing with Two-Gun Dave. I wouldn't have known anything else to do. A youngster of ten can't see the things he should see——"

"Ain't gonna start preachin' to us, are yuh?" There was sudden sourness in Gyp Marshall's voice as the two men turned their heads quickly and looked at The Rio Kid.

"I'm not a preacher!" snapped The Rio Kid. "The only preaching I ever knew, I got from Two-Gun Dave Steel!"

"Oh!" A sparkle lighted Stark Corbey's eyes. "Then yo're still a-poundin' the long trail, eh, son?"

"No!" The Rio Kid's voice was flat. He leaned forward suddenly, resting his elbows on the table. "I don't consider that I was ever on a long trail, Stark. I can't even blame myself for what I was doing before I was ten. I simply grew up on the trail. There wasn't anything else for me. I know nothing of my past, as both of you old roosters know. I looked upon Two-Gun as my father, but something has told me all my life that he was not my father."

He paused, watching Marshall and Corbey glance quickly at each other. Then the old men were looking out the door again, their faces spiritless.

"In coming here," The Rio Kid went on, "I had two reasons. Buck Hall, as you probably know, escaped from the pen three months ago. He was almost dead with tuberculosis when he got to Sonora Rose's

place. She's an old bat now, terribly run down in the past few years. She always shined toward Buck Hall. When he got to her she took him in. Finally, she got word to me, and I went there. Buck told me that you fellows had escaped. He had found out something of Fate Grant, too. Fate's still alive, rolling with riches, and—if anything—meaner and lower down than he ever was!" His eyes glinted. "I knew where I would find you old roosters. I knew you would head straight for this old rendezvous to hole up for a year or so and let everything die down. And here you are! Fortunately you're close to Fate Grant right now. Not over forty or fifty miles from his hang-out."

"Uh-huh, we know that," nodded Marshall, dreamily. "Saw 'im not more than a month ago. He's king beezlebub of Seven Trumps. He didn't see us. Didn't recognize us, anyhow. We was in there for supplies, an' saw 'im from one side of the street to the other. I never trusted that fella. Of course, we didn't know what he'd done to Two-Gun. Damn 'im!"

"I know!" The Rio Kid's lips hardened. "I remember all about it."

"He put us all down!" hissed Corbey. "I can see it all now! It was Two-Gun's one big mistake, takin' that fella in the gang. We had hell, boy!" His old eyes swept The Rio Kid's face contemptuously. "A posse jammed us next mornin' atter the train job. We'd made time through them hills, I can tell yuh! At daylight we hit a cloudburst for fair. An' outa the rain comes the posse-birds. Hell, we couldn't a-timed it any better. There was us, me an' Gyp an' Buck an' Steve, ridin' hell-bent 'round the rim of a big hill. Buck saw 'em first. He throwed up his hand. 'Look, straight ahead!' bawls Buck. We tried to turn. Well, we did turn, goin down that damn hill, an' the posse-birds started gunnin' us. Steve fell dead outa his saddle. 'Bout that time Gyp's hoss goes down, shot through an' through they told us atterwards. In fallin' his hoss got in the way of Buck's, an' both hosses was down, tumblin' an' bouncin' on the side of that hill. Buck's hoss, they told us, broke its neck. An' there was Buck down, knocked cold by the fall. Gyp was still full of fight. He'd lost his hat an' his six-shooters in the fall, but he comes up with his old Winchester. I was throwin' the lead into the posse-birds by that time an' Gyp opens up with his old gun. 'Bout that time my hoss goes out from under me. They'd got 'im through the head, an' there I was, down an' piled up like Buck an' Gyp.

"Gawd, boy, it was a fight!" His old eyes flashed like ugly lights in their sunken sockets. "We was outnumbered. There was more'n twenty of the posse-birds. Buck was outa it complete. His chest was even caved-in by the fall. But me an' Gyp played our own little band in the racket. I pulled four of them posse-birds outa their saddles, Damn 'em!" Again the old eyes flashed. "I know. I saw 'em snatch wind an' tumble. But Gyp went down then with his left leg busted all to hell an' glory at the knee by a bullet. He fell, sorter divin' headfirst over a little bluff, an' then my right arm goes limp. Not much

pain. Just dropped an' I couldn't use it no more. The next thing I knowed it was turnin' dark. A bullet had raked me here, yuh see." He touched a long, ragged scar on the left side of his head. "When I woke up there we was, Buck an' Gyp an' me, tied up so damn tight we couldn't move an' lyin' in a wagon that was joltin' along with a mob of fellas ridin' on either side of us an' behind us. Steve was with us, stretched out on his back an' done cold an' stiff. Buck hadn't come to. Neither had Gyp. He had that busted knee an' two bullets in his chest. I thought him an' Buck was both dead. Fact is, they was damn nigh it, 'specially Buck, him with that chest caved-in an' a bullet poked in his side just to make shore.

"Most anybody, I reckon, could figure the rest." He rubbed his face with the palms of both hands, and scratched his head, still keeping his gaze on the doorway. "There was the usual trial. Lawyers come like bees a-swarmin'. We stayed in jail for weeks, with Buck an' Gyp kept away from me an' each other. They was shore Buck was gonna die. Fact is they said a couple of times that he was dead. Called a preacher for 'im an' all that. Done ever'thing they could to get 'im to talk. Wanted the loot from the Westbound, yuh see. They done their damnedest to hang us all. Jury hung on it for hours an' hours, but they finally come in, orderin' us off for life.

"They took us to the pen, markin' us as bad 'uns from the beginnin'. Gyp an' me caught it. It was hell for fair. Double-guarded, watched by day an' night. They figured Buck so damn nigh dead they were a little easier on 'im. Never figured, I reckon, that he'd ever make a break for it. But just the same, they never allowed 'im visitors. Said we could write to folks, 'f we wanted to write. 'Course we understood that. Ever' letter would be read. We all fooled 'em. 'Ain't got nobody to write to,' we tells 'em. 'Don't know where that loot from the Westbound is, anyhow,' I tells 'em. 'Wouldn't tell yuh damn shysters 'f we did.' It didn't please 'em, not plum complete, anyhow. And there we was, waitin'. We made our break at last. Come about quick an' unexpected. We'd been there so long they got careless in spite of 'emselves. We'd got so damn old an' stove up that the doctors said we'd have to have a little air. There ain't no use in goin' into a lot more long-winded speech makin' to tell yuh how we made it one day by crawlin' into a laundry wagon full of dirty clothes goin' out to be washed. We hid there under the clothes with a Chink with a pig-tail drivin'. We scared both him an' his grey hoss damn nigh to death when we comes boilin' up outa them dirty clothes."

"Enough!" grinned The Rio Kid, halting Corbey at last. "You got away. There's all there is to it. Buck got away. Maybe he did the same thing. I didn't ask him. But see here," he slid his bench a little closer to the old table, "let's talk business. I haven't time to sit here. I'm on my way to Seven Trumps——"

"Puttin' two an' two together, I reckon we can see that, atter all yo've told us," nodded Marshall, sourly.

"All right." The Rio Kid started rolling another cigarette. "There's something I want to know. If you know it, I want you to tell me. No lying now!" He was watching them closely. "It's a question that has troubled me all my life. I can't see any reason in the world for your not telling me. Two-Gun's dead, but just what was I to Two-Gun Dave Steel?"

"We don't know." Gyp Marshall looked him straight in the eyes. "Yuh can say we're lyin' or that we ain't, but we don't know."

"Well," The Rio Kid felt the old, baffling feeling stealing over him, "where and how did I fall in with him?"

"An' that Two-Gun's dead an' gone, I'd tell yuh the whole tale of it if I could, boy," answered Marshall gravely. "Stark would. Yo're a friend. Been a heap o' years since we seed each other, but we know yuh for what yuh are. Two-Gun Steel stole yuh from somebody. Leastwise, I reckon he *took* yuh. That's all me an' Stark ever knowed about it. We've talked it a heap. I know Stark don't know no more'n I do. Whether yuh was a relative or not to Two-Gun neither of us can say."

The Rio Kid stood up. There was but one hope left. If Fate Grant was still riding the old Spanish saddle, that old saddle might tell the tale. And The Rio Kid was going to see Fate Grant. His eyes narrowed and became frosty pale when he thought of the man.

"I'm going!" The Rio Kid looked at the two old men suddenly, his face as hard as a death-mask. "I——"

"A'ready?" Stark and Gyp had come to their feet with a lurch. "Say, young fella——"

"Now!" The Rio Kid bobbed his head with a nod. "I have a few men waiting down the main canyon for me. I'm going to Seven Trumps. It occurred to me," he looked at them narrowly, "that you two might want to come along with me. Do you?"

"Yuh aim to ride right in on Grant?"

"Right in, of course!"

Marshall and Corbey did not answer him for a long minute. Their hands slid towards their belts, hitching them up, and they stood there looking at the long slot of light that marked the doorway. They were thinking. They had thought much since that night in Crazy Horse Valley. For weeks they had been thinking of the penitentiary and the danger of going back to it, but the penitentiary had suddenly become far, far away. They were thinking now of ringing hoofs beating like rolling drums on a midnight trail, of danger out under the moon and the stars—and the thrill of that danger that had once lived and rollicked and sung in their blood.

6

NOT UNTIL the sun was going down did The Rio Kid return to the waiting group sprawled in the deep green grass under the big cottonwood in the canyon. On either side of him, riding stirrup to stirrup, rode an old man. Their clothing from their big, black hats to boots, saddles and spurs was almost new, but they rode their saddles with all the ease of born horsemen.

"This is Gyp Marshall!" The Rio Kid waved his hand to the man at his right as they rode up under the cottonwood. "The other is Stark Corbey. From now on they will ride with us. Anything these men do or say you can take it as straight from me. I know them better than I know any other men in the world. I make no exceptions."

Hank stepped forward. "I know 'em both. Howdy, Gyp! Hello there, Stark."

The Rio Kid gave them a few minutes to talk over old times, then cleared his throat softly. He was leaning forward in his saddle now. In a few moments he was speaking in a low, flat voice.

"I told you men I would take you to a town," he was telling them, "to get a man. The man who killed Two-Gun Dave, a child, a woman and her husband called himself Fate Grant at that time. Since I grew big enough to know how to handle a man's-sized gun I have been looking for him. Not until a short time ago did I find where he is located. I had heard of him dozens of times, but I didn't suspect him by the name he has been using. He had changed his name, of course. To-day he is known as Honest Jack Bellmartin!"

He saw every pair of eyes in the group light with surprise. Every man among them had heard of "Honest Jack" Bellmartin, king of a half a thousand square miles of the Rockies, owner of more than half of a mountain town called Seven Trumps—Honest Jack, the robber baron of the Rockies!

"I see that you know!" A thin, hard little smile kinked the corners of The Rio Kid's mouth. "There are not many of the real bad-men along the border who haven't heard of him. Many men have ridden for him at some time or another. I never asked you men about that. It's time now to lay cards up on the table."

His eyes searched their faces. The Jefferson brothers, standing sullenly at the edge of the group, fired a quick, knowing glance at each other. The Rio Kid saw it, and laughter seemed to leap into the cold, glinty eyes. He saw old Whistling Hank's eyes lower, saw his lips work, tightening at the corners. With a hiss-whistled oath the old man looked up.

"Yuh got me dead-centre, Rio!" He nodded solemnly. "I ain't a man to hang my spurs with yores an' tell yuh a lie. I rid for that jasper. Lasted just two weeks with 'im when I was trailin' through

this part of the world five years ago this comin' fall. He was too bloody for me, an' I'm a man what's done a heap an' seen a heap. I couldn't stand his racket. I skinned out one dark night. First time I ever eased out on a man in my life, an' some of his bunch trailed me all the way to the Arizona line, tryin' to put lead in me for leavin'. They was afraid, I reckon, that I'd go off an' sell out on 'em—maybe figured that I was some kind of a law shark. Jack Bellmartin's a heller, the worst devil that ever blowed outa hell! What he don't own 'round Seven Trumps he takes. His robbers ride the hills. They hit the gold stages goin' out with other people's money. His gunmen parade the town, an' them what ain't in Bellmartin's string have purty nigh got to tip their hats when him or his gunmen pass."

"Then," the glinty eyes were still watching his face, "you won't mind it so bad, Hank, to ride back on Seven Trumps?"

"We're a mighty little outfit to try bracin' that clique, Rio." The old man lowered his eyes, kicking at a gravel with the toe of his boot. "So little I don't see what good we can do. Still," he looked up, old lips hardening, "I flung my hat in yore ring."

"Good enough, Hank!" The glinty eyes warmed for just an instant, then swept toward the Jefferson brothers. "Has anybody else in this crowd played with the Bellmartin outfit?"

For a long minute there was silence. Zack Jefferson's lips twitched as he stood there staring down the canyon. Walt Jefferson glanced up at The Rio Kid, his reddish eyes having grown suddenly mean and narrow beneath their knitted brows.

"Me an' Zack did," he grunted. "Come to think of it, it was a couple of years ago. We left Jack's string 'cause—well, 'cause of a little trouble in Seven Trumps. Lookin' back over it all, I reckon Jack done us all right. This little two-bit gang wouldn't have the chance of a snowball in hell agin his outfit. Jack's outfit rules this part o' the world, lock, stock, ramrod an' barrel."

"We're going to Seven Trumps to change all that, Walt!" The Rio Kid was still watching him. "That's why we're here."

"Lis'en, fella, yore idea ain't a thing in the cock-eyed world but suicide! Anyhow, to speak right plain to yuh, Rio, me an' Zack never dreamed yuh would wanta head a little outfit like this agin a stacked deck as big as Honest Jack's Seven Trumps!"

"If your feet are cold," The Rio Kid's voice was as cutting as the blade of a knife, "it's not yet too late for you to hold up the white feather."

"But—but," snarled the man, "yuh just don't understand it. Yuh don't! Yuh don't know what yo're ridin' in on! Yuh an' this bunch of tin-horns—— Wait, now, Rio!" He took a pace backward. "I—I see hell an' damnation in yore eyes! Yuh can't run no bluff on me an' Zack! Yuh—yuh——"

"Cut it!" A rasp, like a file dragged across the hardest of hard steel,

had come into The Rio Kid's voice. The two glinty streaks of eyes were looking down, cold and terrible now in the light of the lowering sun. *"Cut it!* If your guts have gone to water, say they've gone to water!"

"Don't take yap like that from no damned man, Walt!" The quick rush of words came from Zack Jefferson. He had stepped further away from the group, his arms crooking at the elbows. "We did ride for Honest Jack Bellmartin, fella. We ride for who we take a notion to ride for. We don't have to ask——"

"So!" A strange whisper softness had come into The Rio Kid's voice. "A second fiddle tuning in! You and Walt have been getting restless for the past few days, Zack. I have an idea you suspected where I was going, eh?"

"I did, yeah!" Zack Jefferson's short stump of reddish neck appeared to be slowly sinking between his shoulders. "I didn't figure on this kind of a deal, an' all along I've been wonderin' why me an' Walt was plain damn' fools enough to set out with yuh without first knowin' all about yore game!"

"And all along, my friend," the same whisper softness was holding in The Rio Kid's tone, "I have been reading your mind through your eyes. You are a rat, Zack Jefferson! Your brother standing there beside you is a rat!"

"Yeah, yuh talk mighty big with yore bunch all here standin' 'round an' just waitin' a chance to back yuh up——"

"Cut it!" hissed The Rio Kid, appearing to settle in his saddle. "This is a one-man show. My bunch hasn't anything to do with it! I play my own cards; I do my own personal fighting. I'd kill a man who tried to horn in on it."

"So that's how yuh figure it, eh?" Zack Jefferson's voice was sharp, a suddenly shrill outrush of fierceness. He had gone back a pace, his body bending, head going down. He glanced at the other men, then looked back at The Rio Kid with his lips curling. "Well-ll, *yuu-uh can't call me an' get away with it!* I rode for Jack Bellmartin before I ever saw yuh. Jack's our friend. To hell with *yuu-uh!"*

"Get it, you scum!" The rasp had come again into The Rio Kid's voice. He was leaning forward in his saddle, lips curling, eyes two watching little streaks. "You want to reach for your gun! Pull it!—if you're going to pull it!"

"Don't do it, Zack!" screeched Walt Jefferson, throwing himself back, his eyes widening. "Yuh fool, wait a minute!"

But he was too late. A man with the temper of a wild stallion, a crazy-looking, twisted-mouthed thing now, Zack Jefferson had swayed. His reputation as a gun-fighter was an old one, filled with many quick deaths. Almost as swift as bullets now, his hands had gone to his holsters. A glistening blast of orange fire cut a hot streak through the dying sunlight, and the roar of an old .45 rolled like the harsh *boom!* of a drum over the canyon.

7

THE RIO KID had scarcely moved. In his right hand hung one of Old Two-Gun Dave Steel's six-shooters, the barrel still warm from the roaring gash of flame that had leaped from it like unexpected lightning only a few seconds before. Only his eyes shifted. The glinty slits appeared to rake Walt Jefferson up and down, and the thin lips curled into a thin, cruel smile.

Walt Jefferson had set himself, body tilted forward from the waist upward, his hands spreading, arms crooking at the elbows. His reddish eyes were like bulging marbles now. His mouth had opened. He looked like a wrestler about to attack. A sucking sound of intaking breath came from him, the mouth jerking closed.

"*Well-ll?*" Flat and hard, the word fell from The Rio Kid. "What do you want to do about it, *Walt?* Do you want to snake your gun and settle it for once and always? Don't stand there gaping!"

"Yuh—yuh-uh killed my brother!"

"There's no argument to that!" The Rio Kid's right hand flinched backward, then forward, planting itself on his saddle horn. As quickly as it had come from its holster the long six-shooter had been returned to it. "Do something! Don't stand there! Either pull your gun or back water like a good dog. Let's get the matter done!"

"I ain't never seen a man with yore draw, fella. Yuh got me beat. I ain't fool enough to try pullin' my gun agin yuh. An' yuh can shoot or do what yuh damn well please. I'm—I'm through." Walt Jefferson took a step backward. "Plum done with this outfit. I'll take Zack's body. Yuh ducks can go on."

"Then take it!" rasped The Rio Kid. "Get it away from here!"

" 'Tain't for me to stick my bill in, Rio," complained Whistling Hank a few minutes later as the men had mounted and started to move on, "but it don't seem the right thing to do to leave that fella. Yuh know what he'll do. He'll bury Zack, then he'll burn wind to pass us somewhere in these hills an' carry the news to Honest Jack Bellmartin that we're comin' his way. Did yuh think of that, Rio?"

"I thought of all that, Hank!"

"Yeah?" hiss-whistled old Hank, his eyes widening. "An' still, yuh wanta let 'im do that, Rio? Why, see here, fella," he was suddenly pulling rein, "let me go back an' patch this up with 'im." His hands stole toward the hip. "In a minute it'll be done. I'll call 'im so hard he'll just have to draw with me, an' him or me'll kick our wad!"

"Ride on!" ordered The Rio Kid, sternly. "I have never yet had to slip up in the dark on an enemy."

So on they galloped, with old Gyp and Stark riding beside The Rio Kid, Big Mike and Spooky Jim slumping in their saddles with their lips puckered as they softly whistled a little tune. Choctaw Charley and Tom the Riper, the latter with his blanket plucked

around him and his eagle feather spinning in the wind, brought up the rear. Both their faces were as indifferent as faces of stone. Whistling Hank glanced back at them, scratched the shrivelled button where his right ear should have been, and grinned a little grin of philosophic resignation.

Hours later, with darkness already settled, they were climbing out of the canyon, making their way up a steep ledge-trail. They came out on a high, wind-swept table-land. The moon was coming up, a big, yellow eye easing into the sky. Beyond it, miles away but so sharp and clear they were like figures cut from a board and placed in front of a lamp, seven tall peaks, standing close together, loomed against the yellow gold sky.

"Seven Trumps!" hiss-whistled old Hank.

The Rio Kid led the way on in the growing moonlight toward a bushy grove of low-spreading trees surrounding a big water-hole in a tall-bouldered glade in the centre of the tableland where camp would be made for the night.

8

ROLLED IN his blankets, placed in a shallow hole scooped out in the dirt not a hundred yards from the spot where he had been dropped, Zack Jefferson was buried. Walt Jefferson dragged the last heavy stone in place as the final precaution to keep wolves and coyotes from digging into the grave, and stood back to survey the work by the light of the rising moon.

"Yuh was allus a fool, Zack!" As he spoke, he wiped dirt from his hands briskly on his old black chaps and stared at the mound of stones sullenly. "Yuh made a mess outa yoreself agin that Rio Kid fool to-day. An'—an' now I reckon I've done about all I can for yuh. But I'll settle my debt with that Rio Kid."

Drinking unsparingly from one of two full-quarts of red whisky he had found in Zack's blanket-roll, he was about half-drunk an hour later. A few drinks had bolstered his courage. In addition, he was long used to seeing men die swiftly and unmercifully, and—turning Zack's horse aloose and hiding the animal's riding-gear in a pile of rocks—he had left the grave there in the canyon abruptly.

He rode southward for a few miles, then swung out of the canyon by entering the mouth of a narrow black gorge that streaked back to northward in the hills. Riding on steadily until long after midnight, he finally pulled up, dog-tired, and slid out of his saddle at the base of a smooth knoll where the grass was deep and green.

"The others'll camp, anyhow," he told himself as he pulled his saddle from his horse and finished the last drop from one of Zack's bottles. "I've still got a long ways to travel, but I figure I've got

time to beat 'em. All I want, anyway, is just to be there in time to spill the news in Jack's ears an' start watchin' the smoke an' hair fly when the others ride in."

Going back to Seven Trumps was risky. Walt Jefferson was neither too tired nor too drunk to think of it as he lay there rolled in his blankets. Seven Trumps would remember him. He cursed his brother Zack for it as he lay there thinking of Honest Jack Bellmartin's last words to them the night they'd left.

"You boys are even too quick triggered for me," had growled Bellmartin, tall and straight as he had sat on a jackpined knoll in the darkness above the town in his fine old Spanish saddle with its carved crusts of silver and gold rosettes. "You kill entirely in the open, I might say, and some killings can't be done that way, not even in Seven Trumps, where I am supposed to be the boss of all that lies around me. You boys have got to shove and shove fast. There isn't even a little time to spare. I'm going to raise particular hell about it to soothe the crowds. I've got to make a show of doing something, and I'm going to organize a posse and set out looking for you boys at once. You take Black Gash Gorge going out. I'll take the men and strike Coarse Gold Creek, pushing on hell-bent. When you come to the end of Black Gash, cover your trail, and streak it north and west. I'll stay on the supposed trail for three days, then I'll give it up."

Bellmartin was like that, a man willing to step in the saddle at any moment, day or night, to assist in the getaway of one of his riders. It had been Zack who had caused the trouble. Zack, drunk as usual when around a saloon, had been the one who had pulled the big eastern mining engineer's "damper down" right there in front of the Walking Horse, Seven Trump's largest drinking, gambling and dance hall establishment.

"Yuh didn't use no sense about it!" Walt Jefferson had growled about it as they made their get-away that dark night in the hills. "Yuh had too much red whisky in yore gizzard. Yuh coulda waited, yuh fool, pickin' yore chance for knockin' 'im over when the whole town wasn't lookin'."

"An' 'f yuh had been so mighty awful smart, Walt," Zack Jefferson had come back at him with a snarl, "whyinhell did yuh snatch out yore guns an' blast Old Man Fuller down right there within two shakes atter my guns had started goin' off on the smart fella from back east?"

" 'Cause Old Man Fuller was a-goin' for his gun!" had sneered Walt, galloping along in the darkness, knowing that a posse was already forming behind them. " 'Cause I figured yuh might be too shaky drunk to take Old Man Fuller at the same time yuh was takin' the engineer dude. Old Man Fuller woulda killed yuh. I saw what was comin'. Fuller was old, but he was fast on the gun-drag. He'd brought that dude in to Seven Trumps as one of them experts to

show that Jack was cuttin' in on his workin's, an' Old Man was standin' by 'im."

"Old Man" Fuller, owner of Little Midas, a mine just north of Seven Trumps that Honest Jack Bellmartain had never been able to rule with his iron hand, had been a prominent figure in the Rockies; and the killing had literally stood the town on end.

"You can never come back!" Bellmartin had warned Zack and Walt. "Hit these hills and keep going. If a gang caught you, I would have to spoil everything by coming right out in the open to save your necks. I don't want to have to do that, boys. The fact is, if you must know it, I simply wouldn't do it. I've got too much at stake here because a couple of my men made themselves damned fools!"

Walt Jefferson had no idea of riding right into the town. There would be other ways of getting in touch with Honest Jack, and when dawn came he was up, saddling his bay. Hours later he was deep in the hills, getting closer all the time to Seven Trumps.

He skirted the rim of the second shoulder of a tall, cone-shaped mountain, riding along a mere cattle trail at the upper edge of the timberline. This was South Sister, the first of Seven Trumps Peaks, and Jefferson watched the country, studying a thin, crooked trail in the bottom of a yawning canyon a mile below. To get in touch with any of Bellmartin's old riders would be enough. They would carry the news to Bellmartin, and Bellmartin could meet him at some old given point out of town. There, Walt Jefferson told himself, he would make his business short with the robber baron of the hills, and then he would be leaving, getting out of the country as quietly and quickly as possible.

"Just tellin' Jack what's comin' is good enough for a thousan' dollars, anyhow!" Jefferson had told himself. "Jack pays well."

If he could not meet some of the old riders, men he absolutely knew and could trust, he would have to go on into Seven Trumps, waiting, of course, until after darkness had settled before daring to slip up through the jackpined benchlands and knolls to Bellmartin's fine log-and-stone house that stood like a rich man's hunting lodge at the head of the town. Once there, he could whisper what he wanted to "One-Eyed Pedro," Bellmartin's house-boss, and Honest Jack would see him at once. The tale would be told; the reward would come.

The canyon below narrowed into a mere gorge. As Jefferson rounded the last shoulder of South Sister and struck the shale-covered upper base of The Devil's Bugle, the second peak from southward, a larger canyon from northward joined the smaller one and branched away to westward, widening into a high-walled valley. Jefferson pulled rein and sat there behind the screen of low timber, watching it. Down there a broad, sandy trail twisted through jack-pined knolls like a white ribbon and streaked away to westward after making a long, gradual curve from northward. This was South Gold

Trail, a trail leading for twenty miles through the hills to Christmas Creek, the nearest railroad express office.

Walt Jefferson's reddish eyes studied the trail. For reasons best known to himself, Honest Jack and twenty-five or thirty of Honest Jack's gunmen, Walt Jefferson knew that trail. Down there, right between two giant pillars of rocks that loomed like a dirty brown gateway, was where the Blue Point Mine stage had been knocked over, one guard killed and another one shot through the hip as he had thrown down his old sawed-off "scatter-gun" and had tried to run for it. Further on, down there in a grove of cottonwoods north of the gatewaylike stones, was where the Lucky Bug Lode stage had been stopped.

Something moved in a dark shadow of rocks and pines beyond the gradual bend of the trail. A moment's study of the scene told Jefferson that it was a group of saddled horses. He looked closer, reddish eyes widening. Then he was out of his saddle, pulling a battered brass telescope from the bosom of his chequered grey flannel shirt. He sat down to steady himself, adjusting his old telescope. A grunt came from him a few moments later.

Forgotten was everything now. A mile and a half almost straight below him, nine men were lying down there in the rocks and trees. One of the men was lying on his left side, his elbow on the ground and cheek resting on his up-cupped palm.

Walt Jefferson thought of the day of the week. It was Saturday. He looked up at the sun. By its position in the heavens, he knew that it was close to one o'clock. And now his old telescope swerved up the canyon. He studied the course of the trail for a mile beyond the place where it curved out of sight over a little hog-backed ridge. It was time for the Lucky Bug—unless, of course, old Tipton Dell had changed the schedule. Old Tip was not apt to have done that. He would have to run his Saturday stage close to the old schedule in order to get his shipment away on the Eastbound Limited, the train that would pass through Christmas Creek at six o'clock; and Jefferson kept studying the course of the trail. At last a grunt came from him. The color drained slowly from his face, and his lips hardened against his teeth. A blot of dust, rising like a pale-brown hand above the trees, had made its appearance beyond the hog-backed ridge.

Swinging the telescope back toward the men and horses in the rocks, Jefferson saw that they were stirring. A moment's study of them showed that the men were taking up their latigoes and tightening their cinches. Now—as if someone had given a command for it—they were swinging into their saddles. Now they were sitting there in their saddles with their hands working as they pulled long, black hoods down over their heads and shoulders. In a few moments more a tenth man was appearing, galloping out to the group from behind a low line of trees that fringed away to northward.

"Ever'body gettin' set," whispered Jefferson, his face still pale and his heart beginning to hammer thumpingly.

He glanced back up the canyon. There was no need of the telescope now. Over the hog-backed ridge, a two-seated buckboard, drawn by four fast, mottled-grey horses, was coming. A man and either a woman or a girl dressed in white were on the front seat. In the rear seat loomed two men—big, broad-shouldered, thick-chested men—with something glistening in their hands that, undoubtedly, were sawed-off shotguns. Galloping right along, keeping a little to the right and left of the rear of the stage to avoid the dust and carrying carbines across their saddles in front of them, were four more men.

"Guarded plum well, so they think!" Walt Jefferson spoke with a hiss. He licked his lips with a dry tongue.

Rounding a curve, the stage had struck a wide place in the trail. Like a swarm of fighting eagles falling on their prey, the black-hooded horsemen in the rocks and trees were swooping forward. Quick, round puffs of pale-blue smoke jerked from the muzzles of guns. It seemed a long, long time after the smoke was gone before the harsh, staccato barking of the shots found their way up to the watching man. He had stood up, his face sickly white, lips working soundlessly, the reddish eyes appearing to bulge in their sockets.

"Give it to 'em!" he snarled. "Pour it in 'em, boys! Turn their sand to water the first round! Shoot to kill!"

Two of the guards had gone out of their saddles. The guards in the back seat were suddenly lurching to their feet and leaping out of the old buckboard. Now another mounted guard was going down, rearing straight up in his stirrups, body bending backward. He rolled over the cantle of his saddle. A cloud of dust swirled up from his rearing horse, then the horse was riderless, bounding wildly away, his stirrups beating his sides.

The fourth mounted guard was making a run for it. From the distance he looked like an old, old man. He had flattened low over his saddle while the two burly men with sawed-off shotguns who had left the buckboard were scurrying away toward the shelter of a line of boulders. Walt Jefferson read it all, and saw the danger.

"Git 'em, yuh lop-eared fools!" The words seemed to buckle and twist from his pale mouth. "They're takin' cover. Git 'em 'fore they git that cover on yuh! Oh-oh-oo! That's the ticket! Down goes their shotguns! Hands are goin' up. Good!" Jefferson was dancing wildly now and flinging his hands as if he was directing it all. "There—there goes the duck on the horse. Bully! What a purty shot!"

The masked riders had everything their own way now. The buckboard had been stopped, and the hooded men were surrounding it. The driver was standing up, holding his hands and arms stretched above his head. The girl was suddenly rising from the seat and leaping to the ground. She ran a few yards before a horseman flashed

around the buckboard and flung himself out of his saddle, catching her. There was a struggle. The man stopped it by squeezing her in his arms and carrying her back toward the buckboard. And now, hands thrust above their heads, the two burly guards from the back seat were being marched up.

"An' what a sweet time yuh flunkies are gonna have tryin' to tell old Tipton Dell of the fight yuh put up!" sneered Jefferson. "I'd give money to see an' hear yuh. That's right, boys!" His head bobbed in a nod of approval as he saw three black-hooded men pulling at a strong box on the back of the old buckboard. "Split the thing open an' take the works. Parcel it out among the boys so's she'll be easy to carry, an' fan yore tail for that worked-out old mine just north of Jack's house. I know it all so well I can even—even—even—*uh-uh-uuh!*"

His voice died. He had glanced down the canyon. Swinging around a grove of trees, not two hundred yards below the spot where the robbery was taking place, another party of horsemen had appeared. One glance was enough. Walt Jefferson knew that tall figure on the racy-looking black mare. He knew the others, Spooky Jim, Whistling Hank . . . Choctaw Charley . . . Tom the Piper and his damned eagle feather spinning in the wind! Jefferson clutched his chest.

"Uh-uh-uuh!"

The Rio Kid's fine mare was going forward like a streak, zig-zagging. To the right and left his men had swung away, scattering so that each man could become a fighting unit within himself. And there now! The Rio Kid was calling the play. Riding low over his saddle, two puffs of pale-blue smoke had thundered from his guns; now Spooky Jim was joining it, his old .44 "horse pistols" booming; now Whistling Hank was shuffling in, firing as he came. There! Tom the Piper's ancient old Winchester was going off under his running horse's neck. To the right and the left of The Rio Kid, two old, old men were swinging in, the roaring of their brand-new guns sounding like dogs barking some wild tune.

"Uh!" snarled Walt Jefferson, staggering back toward his horse. "I—I'd hate to be down there now!"

9

IN THE RAW early-morning wind that rocketed and low-wailed in fish-tailing blasts that were like dashes of ice-water, The Rio Kid had rolled out of his blankets two hours before dawn at the big, deep-blue water-hole in the rocks and trees of the tableland. Shivering, both grumbling, old Gyp Marshall and Stark Corbey had sat up, yawning and stretching themselves like old dogs, and had finally arisen to

rake the remains of the fire together and pile an armful of dry sticks on the glowing coals.

The others had come up then. Grumbling with the cold, they had soon been huddled around the fire. A short time later coffee had been boiling, bacon and flapjacks frying.

With the business of breakfast over and the fire washed down with cups of water, their horses were caught. Blankets were rolled, and they had been in their saddles again. They had left the tableland, finding their way down a long, jackpined slope to the floor of a deep, valley-like canyon.

It was when they were mounting a sharp, pine-fringed little ridge in the canyon floor that the first splatterlike sounds of shots had come to them. The Rio Kid's left hand had tightened on his reins. The men behind him had grown as rigid as pokers in their saddles. Alert at all times, the very sound of a shot was an indication of danger. They had halted in the trees, peering through the low limbs to see what was taking place ahead of them. Old Whistling Hank had read it all at a glance.

"From the looks of things, an' I've seen a heap in these parts, we're simply happenin' right in on one of Honest Jack's little parties, Rio," had hiss-whistled the old man. "Plain as day, wearin' the same kinda hoods they wore when I rid my short spell with the gang."

"All right!" The old whiplike curtness had been in The Rio Kid's tone. "I've heard of those hoods before, Hank! Right here is where we'll loosen up and join right in on the party. Get ready to take them!"

A touch of his rowels had brought a sudden snort from the black mare and had sent her forward like a rearing and plunging black streak. He had kept to the shelter of the trees as long as possible. Then he had been out of the trees, the black mare appearing to skim along the ground like a fast-flying cloud.

"Spread!" The word had come back over The Rio Kid's shoulder with the sharpness of a pistol shot. "Scatter out!"

It was an old fighting trick, one that had been practiced years before by Old Two-Gun Dave Steel, and in an instant, The Rio Kid had had the order obeyed.

"Kill only the men with the hoods on!" The command roared above the sounds of straining leather, the flying pound of racing hoofs and the barking of shots. "Be careful of your lead! Send it straight!"

Surprised, all the boisterous roughness and harsh laughter of their victory of only a moment before wiped suddenly away, the men in the black hoods were throwing themselves back.

"Take—take cover!" bellowed the voice of a man who had started waving his arms frantically. *"Quick!"*

But there was little chance for that. Three men managed to get on their horses. Three others who had not dismounted had only

glanced toward The Rio Kid's charging horsemen, and were already whirling away from the scene. The three that had mounted slammed their spurs into their horses' flanks. They yelled, and dropped low over their saddles, shooting backward wildly as they sped away.

Hunting cover, darting to the right and left like scattering quail, the four men who had been unable to mount, were trying to fight. Two of them fell within fifteen feet of the old buckboard. Another staggered, dropped to his hands and knees, got up and lunged on for a few yards before he went down on his face. Shooting and yelling, the fourth man whirled and started back toward the stage, but a fine black mare swept closer to him. Two shots rolled like the double *blam-blam!* of a drum; and the man went down.

The mounted men were catching it now. Tom the Piper, yelling like a madman, had gone off his horse. With one knee on the ground and the other a prop for his elbow, he grew silent and took careful aim with his old Winchester. Another moment, and a man struck the ground.

Two more of the hooded riders dropped a few seconds later.

As relentless as a fighting tiger, The Rio Kid was still after the others, but a yell from old Gyp Marshall and Stark Corbey caused him to look back over his shoulder. The old driver, the girl and the two burly guards of the buckboard had climbed back into the vehicle. With the old driver applying the whip wildly, the four mottled-grey horses were hurling the buckboard on down the trail. And right after it, like yelling and snarling devils of the saddle, trailed Choctaw Charley, Tom the Piper and bushy-headed Spooky Jim.

"We gotta stop them damned fools!" bellowed Marshall. "They ain't got a lick of sense! They're apt to kill what's in that buckboard 'f we don't stop 'em an' stop 'em quick!"

It saved the last three of the hooded riders, allowing them to ride on like terror-stricken maniacs and vanish in the ridges and trees to northward. Riding like a bullet blown from a gun, The Rio Kid whirled and was after the stage now. Gyp Marshall and Stark Corbey followed him, leaning forward in their saddles, their spurs jammed in their horses' flanks. Big Mike and old Whistling Hank yelled something, and trailed after them, turning their horses so suddenly their booted left feet touched the ground.

The buckboard had whirled around a bend in the trail, leaving a boiled-up cloud of dust behind it. When The Rio Kid came in sight of it again, Spooky Jim, Choctaw Charley and Tom the Piper had surrounded it. The two burly guards and the driver were on the ground again, standing with their hands stretched straight toward the sky. Choctaw Charley was in front of the buckboard's horses, holding them. Tom the Piper was sitting there on his horse with his Winchester covering the helpless men. The girl was still in the front seat, sobbing hysterically now. And at the rear of the buckboard, already at work, Spooky Jim was grinning like a one-eyed devil and

going after the stout box, trying to wrench it loose from its wide leather straps that fastened it to the rear of the vehicle.

"Wait a minute!" bawled The Rio Kid, dashing up and pulling rein so quickly he sat the black mare back on her haunches. "What's going on here, Jim?"

"Take it!" cried the girl, straightening, her voice a scream, her hands clenched and trembling as she gripped them into small fists against her tear-wet face. "Oh, *take it*—and let us alone! Oh! *Oh!* This—this is terrible! *Terrible!*"

"Yes, ma'am, it does look bad." The Rio Kid had taken off his hat as he sat there with his left hand holding a tight rein on the prancing, high-strung mare. "Whose conveyance is this?"

"It—it's the—the Lucky Bug Lo-Lode's!" sobbed the girl. "Let—let us go, *please!*"

She was tall and slender, and she was not more than twenty. Her clenched hands thrust themselves out to him. Under the crumpled white hat her face was startlingly pale. In spite of the tears that brimmed them full, he saw that her eyes were deep and blue, that her hair was a tumbly cloud of darkness, and through her trembling and pleading lips he glimpsed sparkling white teeth.

"Wait, *Spooky!*" The words appeared to bite out of the side of The Rio Kid's mouth as he looked toward the rear of the buckboard. "Let that box alone! If you've untied anything, tie it back."

"But—but, hell, Rio, there's gold in this thing!" stammered Spooky Jim, his eyes widening. "I know these kinda things. I——"

"You heard me!" The old file-on-steel rasp had come into The Rio Kid's voice and his mouth had become a crooked slot. *"Cut it!* Let that box ride!"

"But—but, damnit, Kid, we——"

"Cut it!" There was real steel in the rasp now. "The box rides on. *Tom!"* The glinty eyes focused themselves on the Osage now, "put down that gun! This hack goes on!".

"Oh, do—do you mean," more amazed than Spooky Jim and the others now was the girl, "that—that you don't want—want the box?"

"We can get along very well without the Lucky Bug Lode's gold, yes, ma'am!" The black hat was still off, gripped in his gloved hand. "If you have any doubts as to your safety from now on to the place where you are going, it will give me pleasure, ma'am, to furnish you with an escort. If you feel safe, however, to go on as you are, I will see that your dead go back to Seven Trumps."

"Oh I—I——"

But the guards and the old driver were back in the buckboard before the girl could finish what she had started to say. The old driver grabbed his reins and his whip. With a chattering yell he started the buckboard with a lurch that threw Choctaw Charley aside, and the mottled-greys were lunging away.

"Rio, I'm damned 'f I understand yuh, fella!" There was a snarl

on Spooky Jim's wildly bearded face. His lips had gone white. He had stepped back, his feet planted solidly and wide apart. His one eye had narrowed and rounded into a shiny button. "I don't get yore drift a-tall, fella!"

"And I don't give a damn, Spooky Jim, if you never get my drift!" The words fell like clattering boards from The Rio Kid. "If you don't like some of the things I do— well," the glinty eyes flashed, "what are you doing to do about it?"

"Oh, hell!" Spooky Jim laughed suddenly. His hand relaxed, and his arm swung loosely at his side. A long, deep-drawn sigh of relief came from Gyp Marshall and Stark Corbey. "I—I reckon I just don't understand yore game a-tall, Rio. No hard feelin's!" Spooky Jim shrugged his massive shoulders. "I fly off quick. I cool quick. Forget it, Rio. Yo're boss of the party. I'll try rememberin' that from now on."

10

LIFE HAD BEEN good to Honest Jack Bellmartin. He had grown older, it was true, but he was still straight and tall, and the grey at his temples had added even more to his old high-headed dignity. The about-to-jump-spider wart was still there, clutched into the flesh on the left side of his long, thin nose. If anything, the wart had grown larger, the hairs that grew out of it more bristly and spidery, but his moustache, with its ends twisted into upturned spikes, and his thick beard kept carefully trimmed into a stubby V sloped away from either side of his chin had done much to draw attention away from that wart.

In addition, he was a rich man. And he looked the part of a rich man in his long black coat with its silk lapels, the great diamond that blazed in his cravat—trying to outshine the one as large as a man's thumbnail on his left hand—and his lump-of-gold watch and chain; his striped trousers, his soft beaver hat and shiny boots of the finest Russian leather. His house was one of the best in the Rockies. Huge and rambling, the great cottonwood logs squared by a saw-mill, seasoned in a kiln, and the golden-brown stain and preservatives of the wood baked-in. Master masons, brought down from Butte, Anaconda, Missoula and Helena, had selected the stones; and there on the big shaggy hill just above the town a palace had grown. Fine furniture from the eastern markets had furnished it. On the walls hung paintings. Expensive books, seldom read, filled handsome bookcases. The polished floors—scarred by bootheels and spur-tracks in places where they had been left bare—boasted of rugs of Oriental splendor, carved tables, great chairs and small chairs.

"Some dump!" was the everyday appraisal of "Long Sam" McGee, Bellmartin's lanky, dark-faced, Roman-nosed chief lieutenant,

the duly appointed sheriff of Seven Trumps—a man with a scrawny black moustache, sunken dark eyes and a pock-marked face. "I never can make up my mind whether yuh are to set down, stand up, lie down or just look at it. Plenty of cheroots, cigarettes an' pipes here'bouts, but nary a place for a man to set an' chaw an' spit."

They sat on the porch now with its low log railings, lacquered cane chairs and swinging baskets filled with growing vines and flowers. Seven Trumps sprawled at their feet, lying there couched in a mile-wide, mile-long valley, like a jewel at the very feet of the towering line of peaks that had given the town its name. Its main street, running north and south, was broad, lined with hitching-racks and split down the centre by Lucky Bug Creek, a narrow ribbon of shallow, icy water, bridged by three foot-logs with peeled-pole hand-rails. Board walks stretched along in front of the log houses and buildings with their sharp "shaked" roofs to slide off the snow in the winter.

Largest of all the buildings, the front of it looking like some huge Swiss chalet, with steep, outer stairways extending up from the main porch to the two balconies of the upper floors, stood the Walking Horse, looming there on the west side of the street. Straight across from it was the main express office, a long, narrow building. The rest of the town was made up of stores, dwellings, a saddle shop, a hardware concern that sold mining machinery, and other houses standing well back from the main street.

To the east, the west and north of Seven Trumps were the mines, their dark-hole mouths bearded with long, yellow chins of dirt and rock from their spidery looking dumps. To the north-east, set on a knoll in the mouth of Lucky Bug Creek Canyon, stood old Tipton Dell's smelter. It was a big, sprawled-out mass of niggardly buildings filled with old machinery that seemed forever on the breakdown. Beyond it, three miles on and hidden by the hills from Seven Trumps, stood the Bellmartin's Amalgamated New Era, Incorporated, a sea of fine buildings, covered and sided with sheet steel and housing near-modern smelting machinery and equipment.

With the mines having ceased all operations at noon, the Saturday crowds were already gathering down the street. Miners and droves of cowboys, the latter from fine herds of cattle and horses in the hills, were drifting in. Since noon the Walking Horse had been busy. A man who rarely visited the place, and then only as a casual patron, Honest Jack Bellmartin had sat there on his porch, watching, smoking his imported cigar, and sipping his drinks from one of the tall, old-shell glasses that sat on a brass tray to his left between him and Long Sam McGee.

Long Sam was drinking unsparingly, mixing his own drinks. He kept twisting about in his chair, crossing and re-crossing his gangly legs. Once he spilled cracked ice on the floor. Now, in pouring himself another drink, he almost dropped the artistic brown bottle containing the Scotch.

"What's wrong with you?" Bellmartin seemed to come out of a dream as he turned his head suddenly and spoke, his black eyes narrowing. "You're as nervous as a gopher run out of his hole by a snake."

"Can't he'p it," grunted McGee, attempting to settle down with a showing of comfort in his chair. "I can't he'p thinkin'. It's atter one o'clock, now, an' yuh know what's on the wing."

"It has been done before, many times, Sam!" Bellmartin reminded him, clamping his cigar in the right side of his mouth as he looked back down the street. "It's the lay-off we've given them that has you worried. A man's nerves get rather rusty, you might say, when he stays away from a job for a while and suddenly finds himself going back to it."

"Yuh don't have to do it, yoreself." There was a decided growl in Sheriff Long Sam McGee's voice now. "Yuh set 'way back, allus in the clear, allus in plain sight. It's me what has to brace the crowds, lis'en to all the yellin' an' take all the punchin' 'cause I can't seem to do nothin'. This is the last time yo'll run me in on this sheriff job. Why, see here, Jack, I'd a heap druther be on the fence with the rest of the boys, playin' out my string. I can stand men, but when the wimmin start ballin' up 'round me, catchin' me by the coat-tail, pullin' the buttons off'n my shirt, askin' me this an' askin' me that, an' tellin' me what a tin-horn fella for the sheriff of Seven Trumps I make, it riles my blood."

"If it didn't have some draw-backs, do you think you would be sitting here getting as rich as a hog ready for market?" Honest Jack Bellmartin's eyes had grown shiny and narrow, though the corners of his mouth twisted with a faint smile. "If there wasn't something risky and trying for your neves, don't you suppose everybody would be wanting to play our little game?"

"Stars alive, Jack, I know all that!" McGee steadied himself, and poured another drink, this time taking the Scotch with only a little swallow of water behind it. "There's other things. Yuh either can't see 'em or yuh plain *don't wanta* see, Jack. Now an' then we take chances we ain't got no business takin'. Nanka Dell went out on the Lucky Bug. She's a nervous critter, Nanka is, an' I'm skeered that she might make a fool pass an' get hurt——"

"Poppy-cock!" Honest Jack Bellmartin spat the words out of the side of his mouth. He had not moved his head. He was staring down the street, watching a group of cowboys—a little cloud of riders from his own vast herds that ranged the hills—come riding into town. "You always try to think the worst, Sam."

"Oh, I give yuh credit!" cut in McGee, twisting again. "Yuh got a head on yuh. I remember well enough the tale ever'body tells of how yuh come here an' how yuh started right in, they say, to blowin' money like water, takin' over this an' that, makin' the old dogs of Seven Trumps look sick at the belly. But there are times, Jack," his

eyes narrowed thoughtfully, "when I get to settin' an' thinkin' of this an' that. A man can get just too damn big in a place. A fish could live a long time in a barrel, providin' yuh had fresh water an' grub was tricklin' in all the time, but he could grow so golly-whoppin' big he'd bust yore barrel all to Jerusalem an' glory, then what'd become of yore fish, Jack?"

"Why, Sam," laughter shook Bellmartin's brawny chest, and for a moment twinkling little lights appeared to burn in his smoky-black eyes, "I'd turn him over to Ace-In-The-Hole John Turnbull of the Walking Horse to feed the women, the girls and the housemen on."

"A man can't talk to yuh of late!" growled McGee, reaching for the bottle again. "Yuh won't lis'en. I say a heap could happen——"

"You say that every blasted time a job is to be pulled!"

"—that'd dust our hocks down. I figured one of the Lucky Bug's guards to-day was a gov'ment man; yuh only laughed at me." The bottle clacked against his glass. "I'm a man what can smell a John Law forty miles away——"

"The last one you smelled turned out to be a half-baked sky pilot!"

"—an' the cut of that long jasper's eyes on the bold-faced clay-bank had John Law writ in it clear to the back of his head. I may be fooled. A man can be fooled, of course he can, but I'd say that that long-necked duck was a deppity marshal. An' I say Nanka's liable to get hurt, then all the damned old screechin' an' sniffin' an' sobbin' wimmin in Seven Trumps——"

"Will be crying on your neck!" Bellmartin slapped a little bell that made a sharp tinkle of sound on the brass tray. A tall, hunch-shouldered man appeared—an evil-looking half-Mexican, half-Russian with one eye and coarse, bristly-black hair growing low on his forehead. "Knock us together another drink, Pedro!" ordered Bellmartin. "And crack some more ice."

"I don't like wimmin pesterin' me!" McGee was still quarrelling in his slow voice, sitting there squirming in his chair three hours later. The sun was going down. Seven Trumps Peaks were now bathed in a cloak of blood-red light. "It's like I say. I'd a heap druther be on the fence, out knockin' it with the boys agin. Of course, I know what yo're gonna do. Yuh aim to push things hard for a month or two, then lay off agin' lettin' things die down, like yuh did the last time. An' there's Steamboat, my deppity, who could take my place. There's Baldy, there's Soapy. Soapy'd be a slick one. He's got all the hat-manners it takes to parade these streets, bowin' an' smilin' to this un an' that un. There's Needle VanNess, too, only Needle's got too much sense to take the job——"

"Oh, shut up!" snapped Bellmartin, suddenly leaning forward in his chair and gazing down the main street of Seven Trumps. "What the devil is that coming into town?"

"Uh?" Sheriff McGee moved himself forward with a lazy hitch. "Looks like a pack-train to me. Why——"

'Pack-train, hell!" Bellmartin had come to his feet with a lurch. "Look at the people running out to it. It's a pack-train, Sam!" His voice was suddenly harsh and broken. "It's—*it's a pack-train of death!*"

There could be no mistake about it. The bald-faced claybank that had been the horse of one of the guards of the Lucky Bug Lode's stage was leading the way. As solemn as pall-bearers, coming in an almost gun-barrel straight line, ten more horses were following the bald-faced claybank. Their bridles had been removed. Across each horse's saddle, lashed there with a rope, rode a dead man.

"Stars—stars, alive, Jack!" Sheriff McGee's voice was like the hoarse *hoot* of an owl. "There—there wasn't but four men on—on horses with the stage! Some of our boys——"

"Hush, you fool!" There was a hiss in Bellmartin's voice now. 'Keep your trap shut! I read it all at a glance. Get down there! See what all this means!"

11

WITH SHERIFF LONG SAM McGEE slouching off down the hill, reluctant to go and face the crowds, Honest Jack Bellmartin walked quickly into the house, and dropped into a big armchair there in the living-room at one of the tall windows so that he could watch the shifting scenes below from behind his heavy curtains.

The main street of Seven Trumps was filled now. People poured out of houses and buildings up and down the board walks. Bellmartin cursed in a whisper when he saw the women running. What had gone wrong? What had happened to his plans, his orders, his last-minute instructions? He cursed whisperingly. Was he not to know until night came and he could meet some of his riders in the old rendezvous? He cursed again.

"More confounded women!" Lurching out of his chair, he stood up, grasping one side of the heavy drapes of the window with his left hand. "Yelping and yowling like a bunch of old cats!"

"Bad that way, aren't they, Fate?"

The voice had come from behind him. When it had first started to speak, Bellmartin had thought that One-Eyed Pedro had come into the room. But that old, old name—that *Fate*—was like a dagger-blow straight to his heart. Not for fourteen years had he heard that name. He turned, left hand still clutching the drape, right hand lifting, fingers spreading, dark eyes wide, mouth sagging.

Leaning against the jamb of a doorway to the hall, standing there with a brown cigarette drooped in the left corner of a crooked slot of a mouth, two glinty eyes watching, stood a stranger. A long six-shooter hung in his right hand. He lighted a match with his left, slowly lifting the flame toward his cigarette.

"Who—who are you?" gasped Honest Jack Bellmartin.

"When you knew me, Fate," an ugly, one-sided little grin streaked the stranger's handsome face, "they called me Little Dave. Be careful now. Don't do anything foolish. The muzzle of one of Old Two-Gun Dave Steel's six-shooters is looking right at your belly-button."

"So—so it—it's you, is it?" Honest Jack Bellmartin, alias Fate Grant, was trying to get a grip on himself. He shook his shoulders. As if by an effort of sheer manual labour, his face relaxed, tightened, relaxed and tightened as if with pain again. His lips pulled up. A hint of colour finally came back to them. He straightened back against the side of the window. At last—as if he thought it would help him—he tried to laugh.

"For a long time, Fate, I thought you were dead." The Rio Kid had lighted his cigarette, whipped out his burning match, and was breaking it between the thumb and forefinger of his left hand. "A Fate Grant was killed in a posse-chase some few weeks after the Westbound job, but years later I learned that you had only traded coats with a man, accidentally or otherwise, and had made your getaway. That was in a little bank deal in Utah, if you've forgotten it."

"I don't know anything about a bank deal in Utah!" Some of Honest Jack Bellmartin's old fight-spirit was coming back to him. 'I don't give a damn about you, either! Who you are or where you might have come from matters not the wink of an eye to me. You can't come here and run some kind of—of a bluff on me. Why, you fool, at a crack of my fingers," he tried to laugh scornfully, "you'll die before you can get out of this house! Do you hear that?"

"Oh, sure!" Laughter lighted the eyes of The Rio Kid. "I figured all that in when I came here, Fate. You usually keep one or two of your low-brow gunmen in about the house. I know that, but when you start to crack those fingers, I'm apt to kill you so dead you'll never know what struck you! Then I'll take my chance on shooting my way out of your house. That's why, you see," the ugly grin again streaked his face, "I'm holding this old gun so handy. Now sit down, Fate, and keep your hands on the arm of that chair. If I catch you trying to jingle a bell or pass a high-sign to somebody passing the windows or doors, I'm liable to forget myself and blow your brains out all over the room without giving you the chance of a rat in a rattlesnake's belly. *Sit down!*"

Not for years had Honest Jack Bellmartin obeyed another man's command, but there was something in that voice that gave him an awful feeling of weakness in his stomach. He eased to one side a pace, and sat down in a big, wide-armed chair nearer the table. The Rio Kid grinned his ugly grin.

"You haven't forgotten how to mind," he taunted Bellmartin, "in spite of the big bust and all the high-powered gunmen you've set up around you!"

"A man with any brains," Bellmartin was speaking carefully, as if

taking time to fully master each word so there would be no hint of a tremor in it, "usually makes use of them when he is looking into the muzzle of a gun in the hand of some damned fool! What do you want here? What do you expect to get? What fool idea has come into your head to—to make you think you could come here and do anything to me and even have a chance against me?"

"I came to burn your play-house down, Fate." The eyes of The Rio Kid had become glinty and hard. "You've built up a nice nest here, started it with the hundred and thirty thousand you took out of the wagon that night in Lost Wagon Train Canyon. The Utah bank job must have contributed also. They say the money disappeared and the men were all wiped out as clean as a hound's tooth—all except one. Most naturally, that *one* who made his get-away would be you. You were like that, playing men who trusted you for suckers—and making suckers out of them.

"You have a lot of brains in certain ways, Fate!" The Rio Kid laughed softly. "But your ways are all as low as a snake's belly! You're as dirty as a rooting hog's snout; you're as mean as hell, Fate. You never had the real sand it took to do the jobs of taking the coin by yourself. You tried it once, in Crooked Leg when you shot the Chink and took his eight hundred dollars, but even that deal back-fired on you. If it hadn't been for old Two-Gun coming along to quietly stick up the sheriff's office one dark night and take you out of jail, they would have broken your damned neck for that job. I came here, after waiting all these years, to tear you down, Fate. I'm going to knock your props apart. I'm going to pull your roof down; I'm going to tear up and kick apart everything you've got! Then I'm going to spit in the middle of it—*and kill you!*"

"You're crazy!" Honest Jack Bellmartin spoke with some of his old confidence. "You're crazy!" He repeated the words almost softly. "I might have made a blunder or two in the past. I'm not admitting it. I say I *might* have. We all make blunders, more or less. But coming here like some cheap, strutting actor won't get you a damned thing, Little Dave. If you had come drifting in with a willingness to forget, to keep your mouth shut and play a string with me, I'd be willing to take care of you handsomely. But I'm king here in these hills! You hear me?" He leaned forward, his dark eyes suddenly sheening, his hands clenching into fists on the broad arms of his chair. "I'm *lord-god* and *past-master* of Seven Trumps! Men do what I say or die. Die with their boots on, as quickly as a flash of powder—and I don't even have to lift my hand!

"Even now, you damned fool!" his voice was gradually lifting, "I could have you knocked down. A bullet straight through your head would drop you so quick you couldn't lift that gun." He almost made the mistake of looking toward a draped doorway to his right and The Rio Kid's left. "A careful, dead-centre shot with a small gun that wouldn't make a lot of noise——"

"Sure!" The word slipped from the side of The Rio Kid's mouth. Honest Jack Bellmartin had just spoken of a flash of powder, and as quickly as a flash of powder, The Rio Kid had swayed to one side. The six-shooter leaped from his right hand to his left. A long-bladed knife was now in his right hand, drawn with lightning swiftness from somewhere about his person. He ducked, right hand whisking backward and forward. Across the room the bright-bladed metal flung. Like a bullet it struck the drapes at one side of the doorway to Bellmartin's right. There was a rip of sound, a whistling tear, a gasp, a hissed-out sob, and the drapes were coming down, clutched in one grasping hand.

As one Pedro the Weasel had died one raw winter night on Hudson Bay in a sod-roofed cabin from a stroke of the slender-bladed dirk of The Red Hawk, another Pedro—One-Eyed Pedro—was lunging to the floor with The Rio Kid's long knife buried in his throat. A small-calibred revolver hung half-out of his hip pocket. One-Eyed Pedro's right hand was still gripping the black-rubber butt of the weapon, but all the strength had gone out of his hand and arm. Down there on the floor, the knife still buried in his throat and pinning the drapes to it, his wide-open wildly glaring one eye looked at Bellmartin. His body shook. A stream of red gushed from his mouth, and he was suddenly still.

"Clown's play, Fate!" Side-stepping, watching like a hawk, The Rio Kid had crossed the room. With a jerk, he had recovered his knife. He wiped it on the drapes, and side-stepped back to his place against the door jamb. "That's by far too old a trick to try to play on me. I saw the fool when I came in. I told you to watch your signals. The next time something happens I'll kill *you.*"

Honest Jack Bellmartin could not speak. As pale as a sun-bleached sandstone, he was just sitting there, looking like a man suddenly petrified in his chair.

"You see how fast I play!" Laughter shined again in The Rio Kid's eyes, a cold, devil-may-care laughter. "I didn't come here to this house to kill you or any of your hired hands. I came only to pay you a little call. I'm a man who has never had to slip up on his enemies in the dark. When I kill, I kill in the open, Fate. *Not from behind damned wagons!*" And I don't kill women and children!"

"Damnit, Dave," Bellmartin threatened to stand up, but cowed further back into his chair instead, "I—I didn't realize I was shooting that —that fool woman and the kid. Honest, I *didn't!* I—I was excited. I intended to back them away from the camp, but my finger must have slipped. I must have—— Oh, hell, laugh, damn you, *laugh!*"

"At you?" smirked The Rio Kid. "What for? Because the lie sticks in your throat, Fate? Why, I wouldn't believe you no matter what you would say. I know too much about you. My turn to laugh is coming. Listen to me. Only three of your men, *just three,* Fate, got away from the Lucky Bug stage hold-up this afternoon. They'll tell

you how the work was done. You'll sit here and rant and give orders, but there's not a thing you can do about it. You're doomed to watch the rest of the work. You're doomed! Yes, that's right. By the board you're going. Inch by inch, taking my own sweet time about it, I'm here to wipe you and all the rest of the slate as clean as a new pin. I've got all the backing I need, Fate." He widened his feet arrogantly. "Yes, you bet I have!"

"Then—then," Bellmartin's voice was a speculative croak, "you're a John Law on my trail, huh?"

"Oh, no, Fate! I play my own game, Fate. I'm here to play as you play, only I'll do my fighting straight from the shoulder. Not from *behind something!* And when my men go on a job, I'll be right there on the job with them, leading the way and taking the risk of a bullet as they take the risk.

"Why, Fate," again mocking laughter filled the glinty eyes, "before you're much older you'll know all about the way The Rio Kid plays his tunes and sings his songs. If Walt Jefferson hasn't been here, he will be, before the night's over, anyway. I could kill you now, so quickly you would never know how the work was done, but it wouldn't rid these hills of your carrion. I'm going to make a clean sweep, going to give you the fighting chance you wouldn't give Two-Gun, and I'm going to pull you down to the last man. Count your sheep this evening, and see how many of your rams are missing from the flock. And you're scared right now, Fate. So damned scared your eyeballs look like they're about to click. When a man looks at me as you're looking," he threw back his head and laughed a harsh flat splatter of sound, "why, I know, Fate, that I've already got him licked."

He was leaving then, side-stepping through the door, spurs clanking in the hall, off the porch, and into the deepening shadows of twilight. A snort followed, then the lightning *ka-plot-ka-plit, ka-plot-ka-plit* of hoofs beating away in the shadows.

"Good—good Lord!" whispered Honest Jack Bellmartin. "And—and I set right—right here and—watched him get—get away without lift—lifting my hands!"

He looked at One-Eyed Pedro. One-Eyed Pedro looked so still, sprawled there in the fine drapes in a pool of red widening on the floor. A cold feeling gripped Bellmartin at his middle. He shook himself, glaring up at the ceiling. Suddenly nauseated, he snatched himself out of his chair. Like an old, old man he tottered out of the room, out into the hall, to the right and on to the kichen. Then he was coming back, avoiding the living-room as a man would shun a ghost. He looked into the other rooms, looked outside at the long, log hitching-rack under the trees, and blundered back in the kitchen to find himself a bottle of Scotch.

"And—and everybody else gone from the infernal house!" The words came from the side of his mouth as he glanced in the direction

of the living-room. "Just *had* to go downtown to see what was going on! And—and I let that Little Dave walk right in, kill my house flunkey, and walk right out!"

With hands that shook as if from palsy, he managed to light a lamp. A short time later he was startled. A pair of banging boot-heels and dragging spurs were on the front porch. Ordinarily he would have known who they belonged to by the very sounds of the stamping tramp of the feet, but his right hand slid into his waistband, coming out with a six-shooter. The boots came on down the hall. The swinging door to the kitchen was flung open, and Sheriff Long Sam McGee stood there in the lamplight.

"Wait!" McGee's hands flew up, his eyes widening. "Wait, Jack! What—*what's the matter with yuh!*"

"Oh, so—so it's you!" A sigh, coming in a sharp hiss of relief, escaped Bellmartin's lips. "I—I wasn't sure——"

"My stars, fella!" gasped the sheriff. "Sa-ay, have yuh seen a ghost?"

"Yes, *damn you!*" Bellmartin's lips twisted into a snarl. He was still standing there cringing against the sink, the hand that held the six-shooter trembling. "I've seen a ghost. Two of them! Couldn't you see what's lying in there on that living-room floor?"

"It—it's dark in there now!" The sheriff loked like he was about to break into a hysterical fit of wailing. "I—I saw the light in—in—here—— Wait! Put down *that gun!* I—I'm skeered of the way yo're lookin' at me, Jack Bellmartin!"

12

"BACK UP!" Honest Jack Bellmartin's voice sounded like a startling laugh. The muzzle of his six-shooter bobbed. The lanky sheriff lifted his hands higher. "Go back down the hall. Go in the living-room. Strike a match, Sam McGee, and—and look at what's lying in there on the floor, then come back in here——"

Long Sam McGee stumbled back out of the doorway. The door swung closed. His bootheels thumped and his long-shanked, rusty spurs dragged falteringly down the hall. In a few minutes he was coming back. His face was pale.

"What—what's the meanin' of it, Jack?" hissed McGee with a nod back over his shoulders and his eyes as wide as if he had just seen a ghost. "Stars alive, man, but it's a mess!"

"So you saw it!" Honest Jack Bellmartin cackled a dry little laugh. The whisky had steadied him. "The end of Pedro!" He laughed again, suddenly, low and almost softly, standing there with the bottle tilted over a big, thick glass he had picked up from the sink. "A mess

is right. It was done so quick, Sam, I didn't have time to bat my eyes!"

"Who—who done it?" Long Sam McGee licked his lips with an adderlike movement of his tongue. *"Yuh?"*

"No, of course not! I had an unexpected caller. A very unexpected caller, you fool! A sort of a dark horse of the past, you might call him."

Bellmartin tried to laugh. "I had a visitor, that's all. A party I knew years ago, before I came to this place. He dropped in, unexpectedly. Hell, I—I merely turned around, and there he was with a gun in his hand. I tried to signal Pedro by talking. The visitor got next. Pedro make some blunder. Before you could wink your eye, a knife had gone across the room, and Pedro was dropping with that knife buried to the hilt in his throat! It—it was the quickest thing I've ever seen in my life. It was like lightning, Sam!"

"I—I still can't make heads er tails of it!" McGee was grunting a minute later as he ventured on into the room and to the sink. "Maybe—maybe it's 'cause I'm so het-up with what's happened down the street——"

"What did happen?" snappeed Bellmartin. "The other can wait."

"Seven of our boys have gone up the spout." McGee, given a drink of whisky in a water glass, had steadied himself against the sink and was trying to speak in a matter-of-fact tone. "Cage Lint, Strap Klein, Frisco Smith, Jake Mann, Ira Wade, Sid Hatton an' Bill Riddley." He counted them off rapidly on his fingers. "Deader than hell, each man stropped across a saddle, an' the broncs brought 'em in. 'Long with 'em come the four hoss guards of the Lucky Bug. Larkin was one of 'em, Pike another'n. The other two are them dudes what old Tip Dell said he hired from the railroad company. Supposed to be right bad an' chain lightnin' on the gun-throw. One of 'em bein' the duck what I said I thought looked like a gov'ment man. I——"

"What's Seven Trumps doing about it?" cut in Bellmartin, pouring more Scotch in his glass with a slopping sound. "Raising the roof?"

"Not yet. Ain't had time. Thing's too new. The mobs are there, wimmin an' men. Jammed 'round Doc Plunkett's office an' ever'body talkin' at once. Too much excitement just yet. Our boys was sent in with their hoods on. Ever' one of 'em. 'This is Lint! this is Klein! that's Smith!' the crowd's sayin'. Later they'll be tryin' to figure it out——"

"They can't! Their heads are too thick!" sneered Bellmartin. "I never openly associate with any of the crew. You never associate with them. We've played that part of the game well. You and Steamboat Frank rowed with Klein, Mann and Wade the other night. You've openly quarrelled with the others and made threats in public. They've made threats. For weeks these dumb animals of Seven Trumps have been whispering it about that you and those fellows would be going to

war at any moment. It was a good game, well played out. You should have crowed loud and long down there——"

"I did, yuh bet I did!" nodded McGee, looking at his glass. " 'All this saves me an' my deppity a heap of trouble,' I told the bunch 'round the doctor's office. 'We was bound to have it sooner or later,' I says. 'I don't know exactly what they've done,' I goes on, 'but we've all been hearin' about these hoods for masks.' An' a lot of 'em shook their heads. 'Yo're damn' right we've been hearin' 'bout 'em!' says somebody back in the crowd. I think," he reached for the bottle in Bellmartin's hand, and started pouring himself another drink, "I've played my part neat an' proper in this thing. 'Course, as I said, they ain't yet had time to get started makin' a fuss."

"What's Tipton Dell doing?"

"Crazier than a looneytick proper! Runnin' 'round, half the time plum in circles. 'A posse! A posse!' he keeps bawlin'. 'Get yoreself one!' I bawls at 'im. 'I know the part I'm playin'!' Then it comes to me, sudden-like, an' I outs with this: 'Maybe I know how these bad men in their hoods got their daylights put out!' I yells that so's ever'body could hear it. 'Maybe I ain't even worryin' about a thing, folks!' I adds just to he'p 'em along. Then that Peterson woman hops me. She feels like she weighs a ton. Her arms goes 'round me like a coupla crossties wroppin' 'round a railroad switch-stand. 'Oh, Mr. McGee!' she whistles with her bosom piled high an' squashin' right on me. 'We've been expectin' our sheriff to take a bold stand!' That settled it. I had to get away from there. I wish to Gawd somebody'd marry that mountain of fat. She's the most pesterin' thing I've ever met. But—but, see here, Jack," he was straightening suddenly, "what's the meanin' of all this yuh was tryin' to tell me? It's on my nerves. It's on yore nerves. It——"

"It can wait!" snapped Bellmartin. "Go down the street and send me two or three men up here. This mess has got to be cleaned up. Tell them to get here right away. I'll explain this whole thing when we meet the rest of the boys later to-night. Get out. Get some of the boys here. While you're down there, get a posse out under Steamboat Frank and send him down the line to make the others think you're doing something——"

"Miles ahead of yuh!" cut in the sheriff. "Steamboat's gone. Old man Dell's with 'im. So's twenty or thirty of the rest of Seven Trumps. I even left town on my hoss, swingin' 'round the hill an' comin' here sorter 'roundabout."

"Good enough! But get somebody here. We can do away with Pedro without any noise about it. *Sabe?* No noise! Pedro simply left. It it came to a show-down, we might even pile some blame on him for to-day's job. But stay downtown. *Keep your ear to the ground.* Know everything that is going on. Be ready to report it to me the minute something is to happen. I've got cards to play now, Sam. I've got a lot of things to find out. A lot more has happened to-day than

I can tell you right off the reel."

Long Sam downed the rest of his drink with a gulp, and was gone. He went through the hall to the porch. As he passed the living-room he glanced in. It was as still as a tomb in there, but a sickly odour filled the room, and he passed on, going out in the trees beyond the hitching-rack to the place where he had left his long-legged iron-grey.

Swinging around through the shadows, he came up to the rear of the old jail of cottonwood logs and stone at the lower end of the street. He left his horse at a hitchpost, entered the building from the back hall, and lighted the brass lamp in his office.

The main street of Seven Trumps was swarming, the noise of the milling crowds sounding like bees rumbling in a barrel. McGee sat down at his shackly desk. A short time later "Needle" VanNess—a tall, almost frightfully slender man of fifty with a huge beak of a pitted red nose, deep-sunken brown eyes and hollow cheeks—came in. With a grunt he eased himself into a chair. He crossed his spidery legs, felt in his pocket for tobacco and papers, and started rolling a cigarette.

"Looks bad, don't it, Sam?" He glanced toward the window, and spoke in a voice scarcely louder than a whisper. "Wonder what happened?"

"Dunno. I'm only settin tight. That's all any of us can do. Yuh set tight, but, first, yuh get to hell outa here an' find two or three more of the boys. Yuh take 'em an' ease up to Jack's. He wants yuh. Wants yuh quick. Get *goin'*. There ain't nothin' I can tell yuh yet."

"If there's anything I can do to he'p yuh, sheriff, yuh can call on me." Needle VanNess was speaking from the doorway a few seconds later. His voice was long and thin, a voice intended to carry to a group of men who were standing in a circle and talking in low voices a short distance in front of the jail. "Yuh an' me don't exactly hitch it off. Leastwise we ain't been of late. I'm a sort of a rough fella, like my fun an' all that, but I'm law-abidin'."

"Much obliged, Needle, much obliged!" McGee had reared back in his squeaky chair. "In case I need yuh, I'll shore be lettin' yuh know."

Needle VanNess banged off the short porch, down the two steps and was gone, vanishing in the crowds up the street. A short time later Long Sam McGee was receiving more callers. Men and women had seen the light in his office. In crowds, in pairs, and threes, they came straggling in, filling the room and everybody trying to talk at the same time.

" 'Tain't a bit o' use gittin' excited!" McGee told them, holding up his long, skeleton-like hands for silence. "There are some things a sheriff just can't come right out an' tell. I've had trouble, as all yuh folks know, with ever' one of them dudes that come in on the broncs. Ever' one, I mean, what come in with a mask on. 'Tain't been more'n a week or ten days ago when me an' my deppity had a row with Strap Klein, Jake Mann an' that fella Ira Wade. We almost

had a gun squabble right there in the Walkin' Hoss. Not long 'fore that I had a row with Frisco Smith, Cage Lint an' Bill Riddley. Sid Hatton tried to put his bill in. Even reached for his gun, but somebody stopped 'im. I've sorter been sorry 'bout that. Then I've had trouble with others, lots of 'em what think they're tough 'round here. I'll have some more trouble. I know it. Knowed it when I took this job. An' I been on this job eight months. All the folks in Seven Trumps know there ain't been much goin' on. Not near so much as it was 'fore I took the office. Yuh folks can go home, up to the Walkin' Hoss or to bed. I ain't a bit particular. I'm playin' my cards as I see best to play 'em for the interest of Seven Trumps. When I can tell yuh somethin', then I'll tell."

"What we want to know," put in a tall, gangly woman of the pioneer type, "is what has happened to the Lucky Bug Lode stage? We want to know, Mr. McGee, if any harm has come to Nanka Dell."

"Outside of bein' powerful skeered, I'd say, offhan', that Nanka Dell is as purty an' sweet as ever, I—I—*uh-uuh*——"

He had glanced toward a low window at his left. Like a queer blot of shadow a face was there, up close to the dusty panes. It was a face that Long Sam McGee had not seen for nearly five years, but he recognized it at a glance. It was such an evil face, long and thin, bearded like an old, grey-whiskered mouse, the left ear missing, lopped off at the top, the right one only a shrivelled button. The nose was like a beak. The lips below it were loose and wrinkled. Through the thin grey beard they were cracking open with a leering, toothless grin.

"I—I gotta go!" With a jerk McGee was coming out of his chair. He snatched up his old grey hat, slouched it down on his head, and pushed his way toward the hall. "I—I got a job to do."

Outside in the shadows, with a six-shooter cocked in his right hand, he moved along the side of the building. He reached a place where he could see the window where he had seen the face, but there was no one there now.

"Hell," he whispered. "It was him. Whistlin' Hank! I followed 'im damn nigh to the Arizona line. I can't be mistaken in that fella. Stars alive, no! Jack—Jack's gotta hear 'bout this. I——"

He paused. Out of the shadows, wrapped in a blood-red blanket, a tall figure had appeared. A glance told McGee that it was an Indian. On feet covered with beaded moccasins, he was like a shadow. He came close to McGee. McGee backed against the building, the six-shooter still gripped in his hand. The Indian paused, standing there with an eagle feather slow-wabbling in his scalplock. He looked down at the six-shooter, then up at McGee's face, and for a moment stood there looking him straight in the eyes.

"Uh!" Without even the slightest hint of a change of expression in the copper face the Indian grunted. A hand slid out of his blanket. McGee shoved his six-shooter forward until its muzzle rested against

the man's red-blanketed stomach, but the hand came on. A long forefinger touched the sheriff's chin, tickled it, and with another *"Uh!"* the Indian was turning away, moving on in the shadows.

"Stars—stars alive!" whispered McGee. "Now just where in the hell did *he* come from?"

13

"WE'RE GOING to drift in on the town and look it over!"

The Rio Kid had spoken without getting out of his saddle when he rode back to his men who settled down to wait for him at the head of a big, deep coulee riotously over-run with squatty jackpines a mile west of Seven Trumps. Darkness had come down by that time. the shadows lowering, thick and blue-black.

"I want every man of you to get the lay of Seven Trumps. Move in without a lot of noise. Let the folks in town do the talking. All you are to do is to listen to what you hear—and remember it. Come back here just before midnight. If I'm not here then I will be a little later on."

"Risky, Rio!" Whistling Hank had hiss-whistled. "Mighty, mighty risky, considerin'. I'm fur any blasted thing yuh say, though, 'cause yo've done showed me how high an' handsome a man can step if he only sets his mind to it."

"Keep your eye on everybody you can," The Rio Kid had gone on. "You fellows are going to have a look-in on some excitement when we get to town. The main street of Seven Trumps looked like a bee-hive when I was at Honest Jack's house."

"At *his house?"* Whistling Hank's mouth had flown open. "Why, hell, Rio, do yuh mean to say yuh paid 'im a visit?"

"I did! You may hear about it, though I doubt it. Fate—Bellmartin—is a fairly wise fellow, no doubt. He'll probably have sense enough to keep his secrets. I've got him jammed right now. There isn't a doubt in my mind but what I could take every one of you to his place tonight for dinner—and he wouldn't tell it."

Scattered out, each man taking a different direction, they had been going into town a short time later. Some of them left their horses at hitch-posts in the log walls at the rear of buildings. The Rio Kid rode up to a hitching-rack just above the old jail. He saw Gyp Marshall and Stark Corbey ease out of their saddles at another one up the street. They stood there for a few minutes, then, wiping their mouths expectantly, were entering a little restaurant.

The Rio Kid was sauntering into a clothing store up the street and across from the Walking Horse a short time later. The low, barrelish Mexican proprietor—a bushy-haired little man with a pock-pitted nose, a big, drooping moustache and a black square of felt

over the empty socket of his left eye—deserted his doorway and the excitement of the street to supply his customer's needs from his well-stocked shelves and showcases. The Rio Kid talked to him for a few minutes, and was leaving the place with a bundle under his arm.

"I'm looking for a barber shop now."

"Si, señor!" agreed the Mexican, bowing, smiling and rubbing his hands briskly. *"Dicho y hecho!* Eet ees there, *señor!"* He pointed across the street to a little building where a big, round-faced man in a long, white apron stood in a lighted doorway.

An hour later, bathed and shaved, his hair cut and his clothing changed, his boots polished until they shone like black mirrors by a grinning Negro boy who had appeared out of a back room of the barber shop, The Rio Kid stood on the lower porch of the Walking Horse with a brown cigarette drooping in the left corner of his mouth. He stood back in a blot of shadow, leaning against the wall. The Saturday night crowds were swarming in and out of the Walking Horse. A line of men stood with their backs braced against the long hitching-rack. In front of them, and facing them, another line stood on the board walk.

The Rio Kid strolled down the street. There were no women on the old board walk in front of the doctor's long, high-peaked log house, but men were still there, talking and speculating. The Rio Kid saw Tom the Piper stroll out of the shadow of the jail building. A few minutes later the light was blown out in the sheriff's office. The Rio Kid crossed the street, stopping in at a hole-in-the-wall cafe—a long, narrow little restaurant with a counter and stools lining the left side of the room.

The place was deserted except for a big, moon-faced man of sixty with a shining bald head, a huge, beet-red nose and a scrawny moustache. Swathed in a white apron that looked as large as a bed-sheet, the man came forward from the direction of the stove.

"I got a fella supposed to be waitin' on the counter," he grumbled, "but he's like ever'body else. Out lis'enin' an' stretchin' his neck an' gawkin'. Promised to be back in five minutes, if I'd let him go down the street an' have a look around. He's been gone close to two hours. Whut'll yuh have?"

"Throw on a big steak," ordered The Rio Kid, pushing up his hat. "As thick as you have it. No grease in the pan. I'll have potatoes, coffee and maybe a couple of eggs, sunnyside up, along with it. What's all the excitement in town?"

"Yuh mean yuh ain't hearn?" growled the big man, looking back over his shoulder as he opened his icebox. "Yuh must be mighty new, mister."

"Am!" The Rio Kid assured him. "They say there's eleven dead men in town, that they came in on horses, and that's about all I can learn."

"That's about all anybody knows so far," agreed the restaurant

man, nodding and slapping a thick steak in a smoking pan. "I been out three times tryin' to find out somethin'. I'd be out again if that buck-toothed red-head whut waits on the counter would only come back. But yuh can figure that them hooded fellas made a stab at stickin' up the Lucky Bug Lode's stage, that there was a helluva fight, four guards killed an' seven bad men wiped out. An' them bad uns was bad. Our sheriff's been on their trail, him an' his deppity, fella they calls Steamboat Frank 'round here. Almost fit it out not long ago in the Walkin' Horse."

"Good sheriff you've got, no doubt!" The Rio Kid ventured. "Usually keeps good order in Seven Trumps, doesn't he?"

"Usually, yeah. He's a crackerjack, yuh betcha! Long an' thin, ain't much on looks, yuh might say. Not a ladies' first pick, anyhow. Wouldn't be a-tall, I reckon, if there was anything else to pick from, but he's been holdin' things down considerable in Seven Trumps since he was put in office. This is the first trouble we've had in some time. The report's out that he had somethin' to do with all that mess down the street. I'm bettin' Long Sam McGee did have somethin' to do with it."

"Evidently you've been having a lot of robberies hereabouts?"

"So many in the past folks just wouldn't count 'em up any more! Folks got tired of countin', I reckon. This un killed an' that un. Bank's been knocked over three times, in broad daylight, right under ever'body's nose! There's been enough lead knocked up an' down these streets, mister, to wear out an ordinary town."

"Looks like people would get scared of putting their money in the bank if that's the case?" The Rio Kid was stirring his coffee as he spoke. "I'm afraid I would."

"Have!" readily agreed the restaurant owner. "Only Honest Jack Bellmartin keeps money in it these days. 'Course, Honest Jack owns it, sill an' shingle, vault an' cage. Makes money by it, too. Cashes the other companies' cheques at ten per cent down. It's a caution, mister, how fast that fella does make money in these hills. Nobody knows just how much he's really worth."

"Seven Trumps swears by him, no doubt?"

"Some do, some don't. Some cuss 'im, some praise 'im. He does a heap o' good for Seven Trumps, just the same. Built that big church over here in the draw east of town. Sky pilot come along, him an' his wife, feet on the ground an' all pockets empty. Honest Jack takes 'im to his bosom *pronto*. No delay, no nothin'. Lumber's ordered an' hauled. Workers start right in, the sky pilot bossin' the job. In a month it was done, bell, organ, pulpit an' seats, an' hymn books enough to sing the mountains down. Honest Jack's the first man in the door Sunday mornin's, put twenty-dollar gold pieces in the hat as it comes around instead of dollars."

"Real free-hearted!" The corners of The Rio Kid's mouth quirked. "The ladies swear by him, no doubt?"

"Some do, some don't! Some claim Honest's crooked."

"That so? But who would say that after all he has done?"

"Tipton Dell, owner of the Lucky Bug Lode, is his worst enemy, I reckon."

The restaurant man slid a sizzling-hot steak on a long dish containing two eggs and a big spoonful of fried potatoes on the counter, and warmed up The Rio Kid's coffee. Sitting down on a box behind the counter he lighted a short-stemmed pipe, and leaned back.

"Old Tip lives 'round back here." The restaurant owner waved his pipe to eastward. "Big log-house off by itself at the end of the street above here. Close to a half-mile. Some say old Tip's just sour. He's had a lota trouble in the past years, heaps of hold-ups, his machinery in his smelter ain't none too good. Sorter runnin' in a streak of bad luck, yuh might say. Honest's had trouble, too. His outfits have been held up a heap. He takes it good natured."

"This fellow Dell must be all by himself in his dislike for Bellmartin, isn't he?"

"Oh, no! Where yuh find one yuh find more. The little grabbers, yuh might call 'em, of these hills sorter sidle in with 'im. The Little Midas bunch does. So does the Two Forks An' A Gravy Bowl. Name's enough to tell yuh the size of it." The restaurant man removed his pipe from his mouth, looking at it thoughtfully. "Sorter of a gopher-hole outfit north of here three miles. Clears about thirty dollars a day, so they say, an' the two Baker boys, Albert an' Rube, have to split that."

"They've been held up, too, probably?"

"Once in—in ten years, maybe. No more'n that. They ain't wuth it. The stick-ups that happen in these hills, mister, amount to somethin'. The stick-up fellas don't bother about chicken feed. When they go for a job, it's a job whut'll pay 'em for all their trouble. The Lucky Bug Lode stage went outa here to-day with more'n hundred pounds of pure gold on her tail-board. That was enough, mister, for anybody to go atter, an' some of these tough birds just hopped down on it. Wish that red-headed counter-jumper of mine would get back. I'd drift down the street, m'self. Maybe somethin's been learned in the past hour or so."

"Very doubtful, from what I can hear," mused The Rio Kid. "Everybody is waiting for the stage to get back from its run to Christmas Creek."

He stood up, paying his cheque, and sauntered outside. He crossed the street, entering the Walking Horse to rub shoulders with the crowds.

14

RATTLING ALONG in the darkness, followed by an army of horsemen down on South Gold Trail, having completed its run to Christmas Creek and made certain that the gold shipment had gone out on the Eastbound Limited, the Lucky Bug Lode stage was coming back toward Seven Trumps. With a cloud of riders thundering along behind him like a stormy cloud, old Tipton Dell, a medium-size man of fifty with an iron-grey beard, had come upon it a few miles east of Christmas Creek.

With her white dress rumpled and trail-soiled, her hat askew and her dark hair wind-tangled, Nanka Dell had been immediately snatched into her father's arms. Seth Vale, "Buzzer" Dowdy, two supposed bad-men-killer guards imported from Butte, and "Old Man" Cross, the driver, had all talked at once of what had happened.

"We didn't have much chance," Buzzer Dowdy had tried to explain. "Not that we could a-done much. We was hooked from the start an' go, Mr. Dell. Ain't no use in tryin' to deny it. We was caught red-handed an' whipped 'fore we knowed there was a fight on. Too, there we was with Miss Nanka in the front seat, an' them devils woulda started throwin' lead right in on the stage if we had even tried to open up. That's some excuse, I reckon, in our favour—if we was tryin' for one. We tried to streak it. Maybe we coulda done a little—coulda showed 'em, anyhow, what we was hired out for—if we coulda got behind somethin'. But they worked us too fast, Mr. Dell. They had the drop an' the shove on us. They was out to kill an' kill quick—an' they done it!"

"Nanka didn't have no business comin'. Not a bit of business comin'!" snapped Tipton Dell. "I told yuh, honey, that there was a heap of danger!"

"Don't scold me, Dad!" had interrupted the girl, placing her hands on his shoulders and looking up into his face. "I had to go. I promised Mrs. Thomas, the depot agent's wife, that I would be in to look at a shipment of clothing she had ordered for me. She couldn't hold the order another day longer. I simply had to go. I couldn't disappoint her after she had gone to all the trouble. You wouldn't take the time off from the mines to go with me. You won't go anywhere of late, Dad. You have many things to do——"

"Hush!" Dell had cut off sternly. "The fault could be shifted to a heap of shoulders, I reckon, but I'll swear it's the last time yuh are gonna ride a gold shipment outa Seven Trumps. Lord, Lord, honey, but I've been simply crazy. I figured ever'thing had happened to yuh. But—but what did the gang what busted in on the other an' he'ped yuh folks outa yore hole look like, Buzzer?"

"Worst-lookin' bunch I ever laid eyes on in all my life, Mr. Dell!"

had put in Seth Vale. "A redskin in the bunch. Yes, sir! A full-blood Indian, I reckon, wearin' even a blanket an' a feather in his hair an'—an' shootin' like hell. Another'n—a white man—was one-eyed an' as big as the side of a house. Two others was so old they looked like they'd been dead an' buried a coupla thousan' years. Another'n was a fella what whistled like a hoss when he yelled. Yes, sir! Whistled just like a hoss! Another'n was a breed of some sort—why, I can't tell yuh just how they did look. One was on a mighty fancy hoss. No, I reckon it was a mare, come to think closer of it. From the way he talked, I reckon he was boss buzzard of the whole party. Eyes meaner'n a snake's eyes, mouth that sorter twisted out words. One of them kind what'll kill an' laugh. A mean devil——"

"He acted like a gentleman!" had defended the girl, stoutly. "He made the others stand back when one of them was about to take the box!"

The lights of Seven Trumps were finally glowing ahead. "Yo'll drive Nanka right on to the house, Cross," ordered Dell, leaning forward in the back seat to give the order as the buckboard struck the gravelled lower end of the street. "I'll get out an' say somethin'. When yuh come back from the house, talk about this thing as little as yuh can. The bunch of us will tell ever'thing they know—a heap more besides."

He glanced back at the mob of riders booming along to one side of the dust clouds that were boiling up from the wheels of the old buckboard. Steamboat Frank, the chief deputy sheriff of Seven Trumps, was not in the party now. An immense man, wide-shouldered, deep-chested, his eyes two round, reddish marbles under his rust-coloured brows, Steamboat Frank had left the party with a few men and had gone on into the hills with a pretense of taking up the trail of the remainder of the stage robbers.

"I might find somethin' worth while," he had told Dell. "I'm bein' paid to look atter such things, an' I'll take a few of the boys I'll pick from the bunch here, an' I'll see what I can do."

"Yuh might as well go home an' go to bed," Dell had told him. "Yuh won't bring in nothin'. Fact is, there ain't much left to bring in from to-day's job."

The buckboard now rattled on up the street. Crowds of people blocked the way, and Tipton Dell left it in front of the Walking Horse. Cross, the driver, snapped his whip threateningly, forcing the crowd back so that he could drive on through a lane of men.

"Let that hack go on!" Dell bawled. "No use standin' there tryin' to hold it. Talk to these other folks. They'll be glad, I reckon, to have a chance to talk to somebody."

The buckboard moved on rapidly then. In a few moments more it was turning out one of the streets that crossed the main street. Cross drove on to the Dell home and pulled to a halt. With her arms loaded with packages and bundles the girl leaped out. The buck-

board turned, the wheels grinding through the gravel, and rattled away toward the livery stable.

Old Sing Fang, the sixty-year-old Chinese housekeeper, had the living-room lighted up. Nanka Dell hurried on to the porch, and there Sing Fang met her, taking the bundles out of her arms.

"Compee clomee!" the Chinaman told her.

"Company?" The girl's eyes widened with slight surprise. "Mrs. Dawson, I suppose, Fang?"

"No tellee namee," smirked the Chinaman.

Nanka Dell walked on, through the door, into the hall, and turned into the living-room. A soft black hat and a pair of black gloves lay on the long table in the centre of the room. The girl stopped suddenly, her eyes widened. Beyond the table, partly hidden in shadow, stood the tall man in dark who had ridden the handsome black mare at the attempted hold-up down the South Gold Trail.

15

"BEGGING YOUR pardon, ma'am, I came to see your father. I—I wanted to get here—if you don't mind my speaking plain about it—and see him before he had much to say to the people downtown."

"Oh!" Nanka Dell laid her gloves on the table. She smiled faintly, a weak, almost silly little smile. Her lips had become dry. A strange feeling benumbed her throat. "Won't—won't you sit down, please?"

"Er—yes, ma'am. I reckon I will, ma'am." The Rio Kid took a pace backward and seemed to ease himself into a chair as the girl slipped off her hat, laid it carelessly on the table, and sat down on an old couch near the window. "I hope I won't be too much bother."

"Oh, you won't be!" she assured him, and tried to smile again. "Dad—Dad will be along in—in a few minutes."

The room was an overly large one, long and broad and high-ceiled—a rustic room with mounted heads of wild animals on the walls, books neatly arranged in shelves and a great bearskin on the floor—yet it seemed too small for him. In addition, his new shirt felt tight at the throat. He caught himself feeling of his black string-tie, pulling at it with nervous fingers. His old sureness of himself was gone. He felt that he had made some terrible mistake in coming. Yet he had told himself that it had been the only thing to do. He had to see someone with a smattering of authority in Seven Trumps—someone who would be on the opposite side of Honest Jack Bellmartin. His quarrel was not with anyone except Bellmartin and his men. There would be no fighting with the others, providing the others could be kept out of it. Dell, he reasoned, would be the logical man to control the others, to hold them in their places and keep them out of it, and he had suddenly made up his mind. But now he sat there feeling cramped and out of place, and looked at the ceiling,

tracing the lines in the rough, sawed-wood planks beyond the log rafters. At last he seemed to muster courage enough to look back at the girl.

Down on the street he had heard that she would come back with her father's buckboard. He had heard it just before the idea had come to him to enter the clothing store, and he had purchased lavishly. He understood it now, and the understanding caused a slow prickling sensation to start creeping up in his face and spreading to the roots of his hair. Down there on South Gold Trail the girl had almost made a fool out of him. He felt now that she realized it, and though she was not looking at him, it seemed that she was thinking about it. Had she looked up and laughed, outright, she would not have startled him. Perhaps it would have served only to break the spell between them.

But Nanka Dell was just sitting there, gripped, it seemed to him, in frigid silence. Her soft white hands lay folded on her lap. Now they were stirring, plucking at the narrow blue hem of a dainty little silk handkerchief.

"I want to thank you for what—what you did for us to-day!" Nanka Dell, sitting there for a long time as if trying to muster the courage to say something, had abruptly come to her feet. The Rio Kid stood up quickly, a little startled. "I—I couldn't thank you down on the trail. It—it was too horrible. It was terrible down there! I—I guess I lost all my wits. I couldn't think of anything. But I want you to know that I thank you. My father will thank you. Our driver will thank you. We——"

"Ma'am, there is no use to thank me for anything." He had cut in on her almost harshly, conscious of a sudden warmness spreading over his face. "It was something you were due. Too, ma'am, there might have been other reasons. Do not entertain the idea, ma'am, that there is anything saintly in either my men or me. There is not!"

"But—but you are not like the men who stopped us. You are not like the men who stopped us the second time, even though they seemed to be riding for you!"

"A crow, they tell me, ma'am," a bitter-hard little smile quirked the corners of his mouth, "is no better than the company he keeps."

"Oh!" She laughed nervously, plucking at the hem of her handkerchief again. "I—I guess I don't understand."

"I belong to a certain breed of the Mexican Border—if that means anything to you." He was speaking bluntly, with almost stupid frankness. "I have certain principles which I do not violate." He had taken a couple of paces toward the table. "I suppose we all do, the good and the bad alike. Probably I had better go." He was reaching for his hat and his gloves. "I will come back when your father is in——"

"Sit down, please!" There was almost command in the girl's tone. "He will soon be here. Before the night is much older, I look for the

house to be full of people. They will come when they learn I am back——"

"Yes, ma'am. That was why I came here as quickly as I did. I wanted to get ahead of them and away before they came."

"But Dad will be ahead of them," she assured him. "Won't you sit down? Won't you just try to make—to make yourself right at home for a few minutes? You can smoke, if you like."

Old Sing Fang came slithering in. "Coolee," he told them, smirking. "Me lightee fire, Mlissee?"

"Yes, you may light it, Fang," nodded the girl. "The room is getting cool. Thank you."

Then Sing Fang was gone. He had applied a match to a small pile of kindling in the fire place and had laid on a few sticks of wood. Soon the fire was crackling, and a warming wealth of light was coming from the dancing flames.

"Dad's coming at last!" Nanka Dell was standing up fifteen or twenty minutes later as a noise sounded outside. "It—it sounds like the whole town is coming with him. I suppose I'll have oceans of explaining and talking to do for the rest of the evening. They'll just have to know all about the trouble on South Gold Trail."

"Yes, ma'am, I have an idea that they will." The Rio Kid was standing up quickly. He reached for his hat and his gloves. "I was afraid of that. I'll go now. I'll go out the back way, if you won't mind. I left my mare out that way, up in the pines on the slope back of the house. You can tell your father that I was here. I'll come back and see him at another time."

"But you don't have to go!" Nanka Dell laid her hand on his left arm. "I—I know I have been a terribly stupid hostess, but I'll arrange it so that you can see Dad alone. Come with me, please. This way, yes. No one will know that you are here."

With her hand still on his arm she led the way out of the living-room, into a log-walled dining-room, and on into a rear hallway. At the end of the hall they came to a big door. The girl opened it. The Rio Kid struck a match. The girl took it, lighting a brass lamp with a tall chimney on a big, thick-planked table.

"Dad's work-room," half-whispered the girl as a noisy tramp of feet sounded toward the front of the house. Against the walls were shelves and tables, containing various instruments and many samples of quartz and queer-coloured rocks. "It's the one 'keep out' room of the house, but he won't mind. I will send him right back to you. But don't rush away, please." She laid her hand on his arm and looked up, smiling. "I will get rid of all those people he brought home with him as soon as I can."

"But I must be going soon, ma'am." He looked straight into her eyes. "If you won't mind, ma'am, I—I will come back again."

"You can come any time!" She thrust out her hand. He took it,

and it seemed so small, so soft and warm lying there in his hand. "We won't forget what you have done for us."

She was gone a minute later. Her eyes seemed to sparkle as she closed the door, and he was conscious of a thumping and a battering going on inside his chest. He would see her again.

16

WALT JEFFERSON had watched it all as he had stood backed against his thoroughbred bay on the shale-covered upper base of The Devil's Bugle. Death had been on the rampage down there in South Gold Trail. Walt Jefferson had not tried to count the falling men. It had been almost too fast for that.

"Uh! an' only three gettin' a chance to cut loose from the job!" he had groaned as he watched the three hooded horsemen streak it away through the trees, riding like madmen wallowing low over their saddles. "An'—an' now the others are takin' the stage for a slap-over!"

But the "slap-over" had not been carried out. Jefferson had seen The Rio Kid's fine mare dash up to the stage. Some kind of parleying had gone on down there. Jefferson had seen Spooky Jim back away from the rear end of the old vehicle. The box had been left on the back of the buckboard, and with a sudden lurch the stage had been going on.

The gathering of the dead had followed. Walt Jefferson had watched Tom the Piper, Spooky Jim and Choctaw Charley catch the horses. The men had led them back to the place of shooting, and the business of lifting the dead and roping them across saddles had followed. Walt Jefferson had not moved until the horses with the dead had strung away toward Seven Trumps and The Rio Kid and his men were gone, galloping out of sight beyond a low ridge.

It had been a trembling man, a man who had shaken from his heels to the top of his head, who had climbed into the saddle of that thoroughbred bay there just above the timber-line of The Devil's Bugle. Walt Jefferson's hands had trembled so that he could not roll a cigarette. He had cursed himself for it as he had ridden on, keeping the screen of the timber between him and the canyon and rolling ridges below.

"A helluva mess I'm in!" he had told himself, throwing down the fourth cigarette he had attempted to roll. "In trouble to my eyes when I had to blow these parts, an' now I'm in a heap sight worse. Jack'll figure I'm a jinx to him. I'll get a heap of blame. I know I will, but I'm gonna tell 'im."

Scared worse than he had ever been scared, Jefferson had twice lost his way up there on the peaks, and it was well along toward midnight when he had come venturing up an old trail east of Seven

Trumps. He had ridden cautiously. A clatter of some rider's horse's hoofs had caused him to swing abruptly off the trail and disappear in a dense growth of low pines to fling himself out of his saddle and hold the bay by the nose until the horseman had gone on.

He had found the mouth of the old mine in the side of the big knoll just north of Honest Jack Bellmartin's house. The mine had once been a meeting place for Honest Jack Bellmartin and his men, but the mouth of the mine had fallen in, and Jefferson had sat there cursing in his saddle.

There had been but one more thing to do. Walt Jefferson had turned his horse down the slope. Keeping in the shelter of low trees, he had ridden toward Bellmartin's house. In a big basin two hundred yards north-east of the house, he was coming upon the corrals and the stables now. He advanced cautiously, pulling rein every few rods to listen. He rounded the rear corral fence and came up in the bulk of shadow at the end of the stables. With born cautiousness he slid out of his saddle.

"Easy, pardner!" Jefferson threw up his hands, suddenly staggering backward with a low cry of alarm escaping his lips as the voice sounded close to him. A man had stepped out of the shadows, and the muzzle of a six-shooter faced the pit of Jefferson's stomach. "Who are yuh an' what are yuh doin', slippin' up on a place like this?"

"Wait!" Jefferson hissed out the word. For an instant a wild urge gripped him to turn and run, but he steadied himself. "Is—is this Barney?"

"Tiz!" an answer grunted, and Jefferson saw a squatty man there in the darkness with thick, rolled-upward and rolled-downward lips, a scrawny grey moustache and an old black hat pulled low over his forehead. In the man's stubby right hand was a big .45. "Who are yuh, fella?"

"It's Walt—Walt Jefferson. Why, yuh know me, Barney, don'tcha?"

"Sure, I know yuh, but whatnahell can yuh be doin' back in these parts?" growled the man with the .45. "I thought Honest Jack made it plain that yuh an' Zack had to drift——"

"No time to tell yuh now," cut in Jefferson. "I gotta see Honest Jack. Gotta see 'im quick, Barney. There's hell an' damnation afoot. I ain't got time to stand here an' tell yuh about it. Take care of my hoss for me an' let me go on. Maybe I'll be comin' back right soon. I've gotta see Jack, an' I've gotta see 'im *damn' quick.*"

"Don't know what he'll do with yuh, but I reckon yuh can go on." The man with the .45 smacked his lips and returned his weapon to its worn holster. "He ain't a han' to send a man off an' expect 'im back——"

"Uh-huh, I know all that, Barney, but he'll be wantin' to see me this time."

Handing the man his horse's reins Jefferson was away from him abruptly. He found the foot-trail at the end of the building, hurrying away up the slope. He reached the back door of the house. Just as he was about to lift the latch, another figure from the darkness took shape from around the corner of the house.

"Steady there," ordered a low voice in a growl. "Who are yuh? Where do yuh figure yo're goin'?"

"Good Gawd," snarled Jefferson, "why all the guards? This place must be gettin' scared of ha'nts! I'm here to see Jack."

"Let 'im come on in, Buck," put in a voice just inside the door. "I'll see to 'im. Come in, fella, whoever yuh are!"

"I'm here to see Jack," repeated Jefferson, conscious that he was covered by the muzzle of a gun as he stepped through the doorway. "I wanta see 'im quick. It's 'portant business I've got. Who are you, anyhow? I may know you."

"I didn't say who I was. Who'll I tell Jack yuh are?"

"Tell 'im it's Walt Jefferson. He'll know. Tell 'im I wanta see 'im quick. There ain't no time to waste."

Jefferson heard his name repeated. It seemed to go on through the house, passing from lip to lip. That the whole place was now swarming with men he was certain. Men were outside on the porch, in front of the house, below it and above it. A chill shook Walt Jefferson. A sinking feeling came to him. It was as though he was entering a den of nervously prancing tigers.

"Send him in!" Jefferson knew that voice. It came from the direction of the living-room. "I'll see him. Of course I will!"

"All right, shove on, pardner," ordered the man in the darkness beside Jefferson. "Follow yore nose straight ahead."

With all the blinds drawn the living-room had a faint odor of some disinfectant. Jefferson saw that the drapes were missing at the side of the doorway leading toward the rear of the house. The rug had been taken up. For some reason the floor looked like it had been scrubbed in a big, round spot.

Cigarette and cigar smoke hung in thick clouds over the room. Including Honest Jack Bellmartin, sitting at the table, there were eight men there. Walt Jefferson knew some of them. Others were strangers, but every pair of eyes in the room appeared to study him coldly and suspiciously as he came through the doorway from the hall.

"Well, so you're back?" There was no friendliness in Bellmartin's tone. Like the others, he seemed suspicious. A six-shooter lay on the table in front of him. His right hand had eased toward it. His face looked as hard as stone there in the lamplight. "And why?"

"I'll be quick an' straight from the shoulder!" Jefferson told him. For some reason he slouched off his old hat. "When I'm done yuh can ask any questions yuh wanta ask. I'll answer 'em, Jack. Yo're my friend. I know it. Yuh was a friend to Zack. In takin' up for

yuh he was killed yesterday afternoon. I come here with The Rio Kid, leastwise come as a big canyon around forty miles south-west of here. It was there that we learned where The Rio Kid was comin', an' we balked. Zack went for his gun. The Rio Kid beat 'im on the draw. Just one shot, an' my brother dropped dead where he was standin'——"

"Wait!" cut in Bellmartin, sliding his chair closer to the table. "I want it all, Walt. I sent you away from here once. Men don't return to Seven Trumps when I send them away, but all that can wait. Start at the beginning. Tell me where you met this Rio Kid, how you got tangled with him, and where you thought you were going when you started out with him. Sit down there," he nodded toward a chair directly across the table from him. "Put yourself at ease. Help yourself to a drink if you crave it. We've got plenty of time. Sit down, boys!" He glanced up at the others. "We'll hear this tale out. I'll tell you this, though, Walt Jefferson." Bellmartin's eyes narrowed. "If you're trying to pull a fast one on me you'll never leave this room alive."

"Yuh needn't be afraid of that, Jack." Jefferson cleared his throat. At first the words came hesitatingly, but in a few moments he was talking rapidly, leaning well forward on the table, looking Honest Jack Bellmartin straight into the eyes. Not for thirty minutes did he let up.

And now Bellmartin and his men were after Jefferson. Questions came rapidly. With machine-gun accuracy Walt Jefferson answered them. There was no hesitating now. As soon as the questions were asked Walt Jefferson answered them.

"You say you didn't know," Bellmartin was watching his face closely, "that you were headed for Seven Trumps when you crossed the border?"

"I didn't. None of us did. Leastwise, I don't think they did. Me an' Zack had it in mind that it was a Texas job that The Rio Kid was gonna pull. The rest musta had the same idea. Old Whistlin' Hank did, I know. In his own mind he's done figured out the place, a bank on the Pecos, but it was not that. We soon found out that we was headed for somethin' far, far away. When we finally did get the low-down, me an' Zack bucked, like I say."

Honest Jack Bellmartin and his men knew it all before they were through. Catch-question after catch-question was put to Walt Jefferson. He answered them steadily, without even the blink of an eyelid. At last Bellmartin reared back in his chair.

"Walt's telling the gospel truth, boys!" he exclaimed. "From start to finish. We know enough now to play this Mr. Rio Kid's game. He's a fast worker, no doubt at all about that; but we can work fast. Before he is much older we'll pull him down. I still have twenty men with me that I can trust until hell freezes over. I have others in the hills that I can ring in on the deal. All we have to do is to play the

game and play it fast. Why, hell, men," he laughed shortly, "he's only making a fool out of himself. Coming here to buck me!"

Bootheels and ringing spurs sounded on the porch a second later. The sounds banged into the hall, came on, and a big, square-shouldered man with a pale blond beard hurried through the doorway. By the way the man spoke, by his very actions, Walt Jefferson knew him as one of the ten men who had attempted the hold-up of the Lucky Bug Lode stage.

"We've got 'im spotted!" It looked like the man wanted to yell out the words as he planted his big hands on the table and bent toward Bellmartin. "We've got the whole bunch sorter lined out, Jack. But the main plug of the outfit is dead-shore meat. We spotted 'im on the street right atter Long Sam had sneaked up here to tell yuh about the Indian fella an' old Whistlin' Hank. We trails 'im, keepin' well back. When somebody spots the stage comin' below town, he mounts his mare an' drifts off durin' the excitement. Chalk Dutton an' Needles VanNess is atter 'im like a pair of good hawks: They trail 'im to old man Dell's house. He leaves his mare in them trees back of the house an' Dell's Chink lets 'im in the place. Needle come back an' tells me. I sends him an' Bud Moore an' Baldy Fillmore back to keep 'im spotted, then I hustle on here. He's our meat 'f yuh only say the word."

"Get him!" Bellmartin had lurched to his feet. "Take a couple more—take *four* more men with you! Don't make any mistake. Stand back there in the trees. When he comes out of the house blast him down. Understand?" A fierce, wild glitter had leaped into his eyes. "Get him. Let the guns go off. Let him drop, then you boys fade. *Fade quick!* Don't let anybody see you. Why, hell, men," he glared around the room with a sudden laugh, "this Mr. Rio Kid's work is done in Seven Trumps aleady! Unless—unless," he looked back at the blond-bearded man, fiercely, "he gets away while you're up here, Sandy."

"He won't! I saw to that: 'Don't wait for no orders!' is what I told Needle an' Chalk. 'If he comes outa there,' says I, 'blast hell outa 'im an' we'll talk to Jack about it later.' That fella ain't got a chance. He's as good as dead an' in a box. Now, gimme a drink, then I'll be shovin' off with some of the boys here what would like to join the show."

"Why, hell, we'll all go," growled a chorus, "if Jack'll only say the word!"

"Listen!" The word jumped like a dog's harsh bark from the side of Honest Jack Bellmartin's mouth. *"Listen!"*

From south-eastward, the distant thunder of a shot had come, the echoing report a sudden *ba-loom!* sweeping through the night. There was a split-second's silence—then more shots rolling like sud-

den drum-fire, *Ba-loom! Ba-loom! Bloom! Bloom! Boom! Boom-Boom!*

"Chalk and Needle are *cutting him down!*" screeched Honest Jack Bellmartin, lifting his hands and looking up like a man crying to Heaven.

17

THE RIO KID made his business short in the rear room of the Dell house.

"I lied to your Chinaman," he had told Tipton Dell when the old man entered the room. "I told him I was an old friend of the family. He let me in, then your daughter came——"

"It don't make a whoot to me what yuh told anybody, young man!" Dell had interrupted him. "Nanka—that's my daughter—an' the men with the stage told me what yuh done on South Gold Trail. The whole town of Seven Trumps knows it by now. I don't know why yuh done it, don't care either. Yuh done me a turn I'll never live long enough to forget. *Shake!*" Dell had thrust out a big hand. "Dell's my name, as yuh know, of course." He pumped The Rio Kid' hand up and down. "I've been in this country forty years an' better. That is, I've been in Montana that long. Names didn't count much when I come. Don't now, I reckon, but I'm still holdin' on to the one I come here with."

"I'm sometimes called Steel. Dave Steel." The Rio Kid had immediately wondered why he had said that. Not for years had anyone called him by that name. Then, without waiting for anything else, he had plunged right on into the business at hand. "I've been informed that you are an enemy of Honest Jack Bellmartin——"

"He's the damnedest crook unhung!" had snapped Dell. "I bar none, Mr. Steel. A heap of people are fooled. Even the preacher of Seven Trumps is fooled. Lot of the wimmin 'round town quarrel at me about what I have to say, but what I think I say. I don't know exactly how yuh stand——"

"I came here on Bellmartin's trail! His name was something else when I knew him, but I am after him, just the same, and——"

"Then yo're a John Law on his trail, huh?" had cut in Dell, with a twinkle lighting his eyes.

"I am not!" There had been a snap in The Rio Kid's tone then. "I guess I am what might be termed on the other side of the fence!"

"Yuh don't look crooked to me, Mr. Steel." Tipton Dell had stepped back, looking him up and down in the light of the brass lamp with its tall chimney. "Yuh don't look like a fella what'd steal, what'd——"

"Thanks! I have never been accused of it, Mr. Dell!"

The Rio Kid had gone right on then. His story had been brief.

He had not told it all. He had touched only on the parts that he had considered necessary. Before he had finished Tipton Dell had waved him to a chair. He had sat down, and Tipton Dell had sat down. Like two plotters sitting there in a huddle Dell had listened while The Rio Kid talked.

"And that's your man here!" The Rio Kid's story had been coming to an end. "I came to see you because you are a man with the reputation of being strictly honourable in all your dealings. You know the other honourable people of Seven Trumps. I didn't come here to harm a one of them, but they *must stay out of our way.* You understand it, don't you?"

"I do, leastwise, I think I do," had nodded the older man. "In other words, Mr. Steel, it's gonna be a sort of a general dog-fight. Yo're man enough to want the straight folks of Seven Trumps to save their hides by payin' strict attention to their own business. Yuh ain't wantin' nobody agin yuh what ain't on Bellmartin's pay-roll."

"All you will need to do," had put in The Rio Kid, rising, "is to see that the word goes out to the straightest people to just stand back and keep their hands washed of whatever takes place. It may look bad at times. It will be bad. What Bellmartin has been doing to the people of Seven Trumps we are going to do to Bellmartin——"

"Yuh mean yo're goin' to start knockin' over Jack's stages?" Old Tipton Dell had sat back, looking at him.

"We'll probably go much, much further than that!" The Rio Kid reached for his hat and his gloves. "All the straight people of Seven Trumps have to do is to sit back and keep out of it. If we ever make a mistake, we'll make certain—I will—that it is rectified. However, Mr. Dell," the grey eyes had become glinty and hard for an instant, "if *anybody* butts in on our game they can expect to take it just as any Bellmartin man will have to take it."

"Wait!" Dell had stood up, catching him by the arm. "Don't go yet. We're goin' to have a bite to eat——"

"I've had my dinner, thank you, and must be on my way."

"Still, we could talk a little more. I—er—I'd like to get all things straight."

"You have all you need. There is only this much more to say," he had added. "No man has ever placed confidence in me and had it betrayed. Play your part. I'll play mine. All I ask—and I want you to get *that part of it straight*—is that the crooks of Seven Trumps be allowed to play out their cards against mine. If you don't mind, now," a peculiar little smile had quirked his lips, "I'll follow an old habit of mine. I never like to go out of a place by the same door I went in. I have an idea I was followed here. I'll drop out the back door. Good night!"

He had gone then, stepping quickly into the hall. A few moments later he had opened the rear door gently. In the shadow of the house he had stepped outside. For a second he had stood there, listening,

then he had disappeared in a thick line of shrubbery. Ten minutes later he had circled his mare and had come down toward her from the slope above the house.

Something had sounded a warning when he was thirty feet above the mare. It was the merest sound of a sound, possibly the faint snapping of a twig. Coming down in a line behind a squatty row of low pines he had halted, standing there listening with his hands on the butts of Old Two-Gun Dave Steel's six-shooters. A half-minute had passed. His mare had snorted at something. Another half-minute had passed. A spurred heel had moved somewhere. Every muscle tensed, feet braced for a spring to the right or left, The Rio Kid had cocked his head to one side.

Somebody sneezed.

"Quiet, quiet!" had whispered a voice, tensely faint.

In a moment more The Rio Kid had located a crouching figure down there in the shadows below him. Soon he had located another, then another and another. One of the shadows had been moving, sneaking out of the pines and easing along just above the mare. Both six-shooters had come out of The Rio Kid's holsters.

"Get him!" had suddenly thundered The Rio Kid. *"There he is!"*

The old six-shooter in his right hand had gashed out a hot flame of red fire, fire that had streaked toward the sneaking figure above the mare. There was a yell. Nerves on edge, the man below had come up, shooting. The man who had been sneaking along above the mare had turned to run. The other men were after him, firing and making sounds like barking dogs. One of the men—a long, thin man who looked like only the running skeleton of a man—passed close to The Rio Kid. The six-shooter in his right hand lifted, coming down on the man's head with a dull *plump!* The man stumbled and fell headlong and suddenly unconscious into the brush.

"Get 'im! Get 'im!" bawled the other two men who were after the third man. "Drop 'im, damn it!"

"Waa-wait!" wailed a voice. "It—*it's Baldy yo're atter, damn it!"*

With a few leaps The Rio Kid had reached his mare. A spring had carried him into his saddle. Like a bullet he was leaving the scene now. Behind him a man's terror-ridden voice was screeching:

"Yuh shot me, yuh damn fools, *yo've shot me!"*

Like the mocking clatter of a drum the flying hoofs of a running black mare went back to them—*ka-plot-ka-plit, ka-plot-ka-plit!* There was a harsh laugh, and The Rio Kid was gone with the darkness swallowing him.

18

"FOR GAWD'S SAKE, don't ask me how it happened, Jack! Baldy Fillmore's shot. Either Chalk Dutton or Bud Moore done it. Maybe I mighta had a hand in it. I can't say. We—we got so damn rattled

there ain't no way of tellin' how it was done. Baldy got rattled too. He started to run, an' naturally we thought it was the fella what owned the mare."

Needle VanNess had brought the news up the hill to Honest Jack Bellmartin. He had come through the cordon of guards around the house, and had found Bellmartin alone, pacing the floor and chewing a cigar belligerently. Van Ness had eased into a deep chair at the end of the table, and had dragged off his old grey hat.

"I'll take any blame yuh wanta lay on me, Jack." Needle VanNess crossed his long hands on his knee and looked at the floor. "There wasn't no chance for Baldy. Four bullets cut 'im through an' through. I reckon the pore fella was dyin' when Chalk an' Bud picked 'im up. He was dead 'fore we could get 'im to Doc Plunkett's office. I was knocked cold for a minute or two. Maybe a little longer. Somebody hit me on the head with the barrel of a gun or somethin'. I went down. When I staggered up Baldy was cussin' an' cryin' down there below me. We got 'im away as soon as we could."

"And now you come here to tell me about it!" There was a sharp hiss in Honest Jack Bellmartin's voice. He spat out his cigar, walked to the table, and poured himself a drink. "My God, man, what next? What a blundering gang of idiots I've got around me!"

"We ain't never failed yuh before, Jack!" VanNess reminded him. "We allus have carried out orders. A few times we've failed on a slap-over, but it was allus 'cause the orders from yuh wasn't right in tune with the job we was to do. Yo've said that, yoreself. To-night's work is a mess. I'm admittin' it. There ain't no excuse for it other than to say we got rattled. We was like a bunch of loco broncs, I reckon yuh might say. I ain't never gonna deny it. But it's done. There ain't nothin' else we can do 'bout it."

"And what about the others who were with this Rio Kid? The ones who were parading the streets?"

"Gone," answered VanNess, simply. "I saw Sandy a minute or two ago. 'They're faded out,' he tells me. 'They was here, then they wasn't.' I reckon they musta all come to town to leave about the same time."

"And Baldy Moore's dead!"

"An' Baldy Moore's dead!" repeated VanNess, looking at his hands. "I wish yuh would gimme a drink, Jack. I'm feelin' mighty, mighty bad."

"I should stomp your damned liver out all over this floor!" hissed Bellmartin, coming close to him. "I should take you apart, you skeleton-looking——"

"There ain't a bit of need for all that!" Needle VanNess held up his left hand and leaned back in his chair. "Yuh ain't got no men to spare now, Jack Bellmartin. Yuh need all yuh got, an' if things keep a-goin' like they've started, yo're gonna need a sight more. Stompin' my liver out here on yore floor wouldn't he'p matters. I don't wanta

row with yuh, but I'm a man," his eyes appeared to harden and sheen like warm glass, "who ain't gonna lie right down like a pup an' let yuh stomp my liver out."

"You're what?" The words seemed to rip from the side of Bellmartin's mouth. He had leaned forward, hands thrusting out like half-gripped claws. "What are you saying to me?"

"I said what I said, gawdamn yuh, Jack!" Needle VanNess was out of his chair with a bound. He threw Bellmartin back. A right hand flew to his belt. A six-shooter gleamed in the lamplight. "Stand back from me! I might look like a gawdamned skeleton! I might be one, but I've played out yore game as straight as I could with yuh, Bellmartin. I don't take stompin's an' cussin's from no man livin'!"

"That'll do, Needle! Put up yore gun!" Sheriff Long Sam McGee had appeared in a doorway to the hall, looming there behind VanNess with his six-shooters in his hands. "There ain't no need for a row, *damnit!* 'Twon't pay. Yuh set down, too, Jack Bellmartin."

"So yuh got the drop, huh?" Needle VanNess had fired a glance back over his shoulder. "Well, yuh take it, Sam, if yuh wanta. But I'm holdin' my own ground or dyin' on it right here. I ain't wantin' no trouble, but Jack Bellmartin knows the kind of a hair-pin I am. I've done his damn dirty jobs; I've been one of his right-hand men. Yo're supposed to be a friend of mine, Sam McGee. We come to this country——"

"Together, yeah!" put in McGee. "Maybe we'll leave it together, too, Needle. An' I ain't takin' no part agin yuh. I'm for peace. Put up yore gun. I'm a friend of yuh an' Jack. There ain't gonna be no hell poppin' in this dump to-night. That's straight from the shoulder. Set down, both of yuh squirts!"

"Go to hell!" snapped Bellmartin, then he turned to VanNess, and was thrusting out his hand. "Put up your gun and shake, Needle," he ordered. "My fault. I'm a shade too jumpy about everything to-night. You're my friend. Old man, you've been tried through the fire many times," he was gripping VanNess's hand now, "and you proved true metal. Let's have a drink. When I make a mistake, I admit it."

"I—I'm sorry it happened, Jack," stammered VanNess a few moments later. "It—it's just one of them things."

"Ever'body's jumpy tonight," grunted McGee, coming forward with his six-shooters jammed back in their holsters. "There's reasons for it. We're tryin' to push things just too fast. We're rattled. We're all not doin' a thing but fightin' our own heads like a bronc with his first halter on. What we've gotta do is to get down to some straight figurin'. We've gotta take our time, make a plan that'll hold water, then carry it out. Hand me that glass over there, Needle. I'll take a little horn of his whisky, m'self."

"Sit down, sit down," ordered Bellmartin in a suddenly pleasant

tone. "It's like you say, Sam. We're acting like wild horses with a halter on."

"Shore!" agreed the sheriff of Seven Trumps. "An' when yuh get right down to yore old way of figurin', takin' ever'thing cool an' as ca'm as a hawg on ice, there ain't nobody goin' whut'll ever beat yuh out, Honest Jack Bellmartin. When yuh play yore cards close to yore belly, stoppin' to think a little 'bout this an' a little 'bout that—well, Jack, yuh *just can't* be beat!"

Daylight found them there. During the night other men drifted in and out. Every man's report was the same. There was no sign of The Rio Kid and his men.

"Dusted out complete!" growled a big, black-bearded, thick-chested gunman by the name of "Blackie" Yarberry. "I ain't figurin' them plum gone, but they musta got a whiff of how the hair was about to burn in Seven Trumps. 'Fore they're so much older they'll be smellin' that hair an' watchin' it burn. I ain't worried. We've bucked deputy marshals an' all other sorts of law. Two years ago we had a big blow-over in here. There was a big blow when Zack Jefferson an' Walt killed Old Man Fuller an' the minin' engineer fella. Some of us even admitted that we was done gone up the spout, but yuh see we didn't go. We played it out, holdin' ever'thing down nice an' sweet. Why, hell, gents, even cyclones blow over in due time!"

Walt Jefferson was still there. Now and then he entered the room, but for the most part he kept himself out of sight.

"I don't want you showing your nose in Seven Trumps!" Bellmartin had told him. "Stick close to the house. There's a room in the basement you can use. I'll keep you for a day or two, anyway. Maybe something will come up where I can use you, but don't get it in your head that these Seven Trumpers have forgotten the kick-off of Old Man Fuller. They haven't. His Little Midas is still here, still running, I mean, and his relatives are running it. One word that you were here, and there and then I would have some more trouble on my hands."

The disposal of One-Eyed Pedro's body had been accomplished within an hour and thirty minutes. Four men had at first carried the body into the basement. Down there Pedro's pockets had been stripped of all valuables. The body had been rolled in the bloody drape, a worn blanket and a strip of canvas. Later it had been carried out through the night and down the slope to the corrals where a hole dug under a manger in one of the rear stables had received it, and One-Eyed Pedro's history had been forever closed.

At ten o'clock, bathed and trimmed, wearing a cut-away coat, striped trousers whose bottoms covered the tops of his boots, Bellmartin went down the slope of the hill and to church, riding a fine black gelding and his fine Spanish saddle. Bowing to the ladies, hands shaking here and there, and smiling, he took his old place up front, and sat there as straight and trim as a deacon. Sallie Lead-

better, a trim little old maid of forty-odd, with a sharp, decidedly red nose and weak, watering blue eyes, played her old tune on the organ. But the sermon preached by Reverend Elwood Dawson, a tall, thin man of fifty-odd, was not a sermon for a man in Honest Jack Bellmartin's mood.

"That is what the Scriptures mean!" Dawson kept crying from the pulpit. "He who lives by the sword shall die by it! . . ."

Bellmartin had left the church abruptly when the services were over. He led his horse and walked home with Sallie Leadbetter, but he left her at the gate of her cottage, and rode on back to his big house on the hill.

"One more week's work done!" he growled to Walt Jefferson, and poured himself a drink. "It's my one great political angle."

"Yuh shore are faithful to yore cause," grinned Jefferson, licking his lips expectantly. "I reckon nobody's ever knowed yuh to miss goin', from what all the boys say."

"Anybody been here since I left?"

"McGee drifted in. Ever'thing seems quiet enough. They says the preacher's gonna preach funerals this afternoon. I reckon yo'll be attendin' 'em?"

"I reckon I won't!" sneered Bellmartin. "Andy Gosset will be here to tell anybody who might call that I am sick. You keep out of the way. I know how to handle these things."

He was asleep an hour later. Not until darkness was settling over the hills was he up, then it was to see Long Sam McGee. McGee had come slouching up the slope. In dressing-gown and house slippers Bellmartin met him in the living-room.

"Well?" There was a growl in Bellmartin's voice. "Anything new?"

"Nothin' right special, Jack," grunted the sheriff, sliding into a deep arm-chair, crossing his legs and hanging his hat on his knee. "The funeral business was a knock-down, drag-'em-out for fair. That fella Dawson had the crowd goin'. Wimmin wipin' their noses an' their eyes. Heap of 'em busted right out cryin'. Lots of men got het up an' blood showin' in their eyes. I reckon Tip Dell an' his Nanka got mad about somethin'. They left as soon as they could. Why, when Dawson got strung out he was cryin' for blood, yuh might say. 'A eye for a eye, a tooth for a tooth!' he kept bawlin'. He thinks the whole mess oughta be cleaned up by stringin' ever'body what had anything to do with the mess on a limb. He poured in into that Rio Kid fella an' his bunch. He poured it in the three of our boys what got away from the job. Four or five times while he was talkin', he looked right at me, shakin' his finger. It looked like ever'body in Seven Trumps was there, an'——"

"The Walking Horse was closed up tight, wasn't it?" interrupted Bellmartin with a frown.

"Oh, shore! Tighter'n a drum. Yuh might know Ace-In-A-Hole would do that. He's an old head at these things. But yuh oughta

tell that sky pilot somethin', Jack. He's too windy. He gets rearin' an' chargin' mad. Maybe he thinks he's doin' a heap of good for his book, but he's as dangerous as a cocked gun with a hair trigger. He believes what he says. Why, he'd start mobs a-marchin' in Seven Trumps if he could. He blasted ever'body down. Old man Dell an' his gal, as I say, musta got mad. Dell got up and looked right at 'im, an' turned an' walked away. Didn't stay for the buryin'. Just squared their shoulders an 'walked off. Why don't yuh talk to Dawson? Why don't yuh sorter give 'im a line what to say at these things?"

"I haven't any control over that fool, Sam!" snapped Bellmartin. "I'm not his boss. I've only got his confidence. I have to handle him with silk gloves. If I hadn't built that church, somebody else would have done the job for him. I saw it coming. I was just quick enough to take advantage of an opportunity."

"Uh-huh, I reckon that's right."

"About The Rio Kid, is there anything new? Have you heard anything?"

"I've got six or eight of the boys driftin' out in the hills, sorter keepin' an eye out. So far there's no reports."

"We've got to get that outfit, Sam!" Bellmartin was standing there glowering at him over a glass in his left hand and a bottle in his right. "We've *got* to put him down!"

"An' I've figured out the way. It's what I come to talk about. I'm pickin' eight of the boys an 'addin' 'em to my deppity string, an' now lis'en close. One day this week we'll send out a good shipment. It'll be knocked over. Two or three of our boys can do it. Nobody hurt, yuh see. Just a lota fuss. We'll play it out fine, yuh see. Sandy'll be along with it—as a guard. He can give a good description of this Rio Kid's outfit. We can start from there. If we don't work it so well the first time we can do it agin. While we're playin' this out, our boys'll be as nice as little ma-ma's angels. No funny stuff goin' on at all, yuh see. Our business, yuh might say, takes a full back-seat. 'Fore I'm done, I'll have ever'thing in Seven Trumps that even looks like it wears pants a-ridin' in my string of deppities. Yuh get the point, don't yuh? It's plum simple——"

"If it works!"

"Well—of course, Jack, but won't anything work if yuh play it strong enough? I've gone over it with the rest of the boys. One hold-up of our stage—just *one,* Jack—an' we'll have the right to blast down these birds ever' time one of 'em shows his mug. Why, hell, there ain't many of 'em! Killed, cooked an' passed around, there's enough men on yore string to eat ever'one of 'em an' still be hungry! That's uh fact, if yuh stop an' think of it. All we need here in Seven Trumps is just the excuse to ease up on the blind side of them ducks an' blow 'em down——"

"Have you forgotten that this Rio Kid has been to see Tipton

Dell?" There was a sneer in Honest Jack Bellmartin's voice now. "Have you any way of knowing what he said to Dell?"

"There might be means an' ways of findin' out," nodded the sheriff. "Come to a pinch, even men like Tip Dell have been knowed to ease outa a picture so slick an' clean nobody ever hearn of 'im agin."

"That's risky, Sam!"

"All life's risky, Jack. An' let me tell yuh somethin' now." The sheriff had leaned forward in his chair, looking up steadily at Bellmartin. "There's somethin' behind all this—or, leastwise, it looks thataway—that yuh ain't puttin' out to the rest. This Rio Kid fella's got somethin' on yuh, Jack. Somethin'—if yuh won't mind me speakin' plain—that's sorter wiggled yore ears an' left 'em kinda floppin'. What it is I don't know. Don't care. I just know this. Yo're kingpin of Seven Trumps. There ain't a man in the the country what can shake yuh. Yuh can turn this whole country over—an' get away with it. A heap right here know yuh. A heap here would cut yore throat, but they know they couldn't get away with it. Our trouble lies in the fact that this is the first time anybody has come right out in the open an' started buckin' us. It's bad, but it ain't so bad that we can't handle it. The boys are just a little rattled. Yo're a little rattled. I'm rattled. But we can handle it, yuh keepin' way back in the clear, like yuh allus keep. I can put on a show when I start. With the power I've got here as sheriff, I can turn this thing under."

"Maybe you can, Sam." There was growing confidence in Bellmartin's voice as he straightened and looked at the window. "This man who calls himself The Rio Kid is the only man in the world I am afraid of, Sam. He's got to die."

"An' yuh don't want 'im just shot so's he can lie an' talk a heap 'fore he cashes his chips?" grunted McGee, reaching for the bottle. "I see the point. That's what I'm drivin' straight to. Trust me with this thing, an' I'll carry it through."

"Sam," Bellmartin gripped the arms of the sheriff's chair and looked him straight into the eyes, "listen to this. I'll give ten thousand dollars, in gold, to the man who kills The Rio Kid. Do you hear that? Ten thousand dollars, gold!"

"A lota money, Jack, just for a blow-down."

"But the money's not to hunt, Sam. I've got it. It's not to hunt, as you know. It's waiting for some man to come along and pick it off. If you engineer a deal that will take The Rio Kid off suddenly, without giving him a chance to talk, it's yours. But you keep in mind what I said about Tipton Dell. If he gets to talkin'—if his mouth gets to running away with him—we'll simply have to do something about it, regardless of the cost."

19

"YUH FELLAS can say what yuh wanta, an' yuh think what yuh wanta, but I say there's somethin' wrong with The Rio Kid!" Spooky Jim spoke grumblingly in the mouth of a great, cave-like opening high up on the slopes of The Eagle's Saddle, the towering peak directly east of Seven Trumps. "I know a thing when I see it. Yuh dudes oughta be able to see it, plain as it is. He ain't been the same since we hit that stage down the trail, an' it was showin' mighty plain in his face an' his eyes last night when he met us back in that coulee. He's gone mooney 'bout somethin'. Acts like he's done lost all interest in us an' ever'-thing else in general."

Sunday night darkness had settled long before. A camp fire glowed back in the rocks, its flickering light completely hidden from any place a hundred feet away from the cave-like opening by a ring of tall boulders. A blanket had been spread on a long, smooth rock, and for most of the day a card game had been in progress.

Through a fine pair of binoculars belonging to The Rio Kid, Whistling Hank's old pair of Army field glasses and Spooky Jim's long, 40-power telescope, they had kept a close check on the Sunday crowds in Seven Trumps. Spooky Jim and Whistling Hank had snickered as they had watched Honest Jack Bellmartin ride off to church. They had looked at each other and had grinned knowingly, nodding their heads, when they had seen him leave the church to walk to a gate with a woman, and return to his place of highness above the town. Later they had studied a jammed-together mob of humanity with the men standing with their hats off in a grove of cottonwoods below Dr. Plunkett's high-peaked office building.

"Funeral goin' on now," had hiss-whistled old Hank. "Fella standin' on the big crate that looks like a piano box must be a parson. From the way he's slingin' his hands an' swayin' his body, he's tellin' 'em the news. I never saw a place so het-up as it was last night."

"Wasn't a heap of noise about it!" Spooky Jim had reminded him, squatting there behind bushes on the slope beside him with his telescope braced in the crotch of a small pine. "I kinda thought it was plum tame, Hank."

"Too tame. That's where the trouble lay," had nodded Whistling Hank. "All them folks wasn't sayin' much, an' that's bad. When people ain't talkin' a heap, when they'll just look at yuh an' say nothin', sometime's they're doin' a heap of thinkin'. When they get to thinkin', it's bad. Lots of 'em kept standin' an' lookin' toward Bellmartin's fine house. They wasn't sayin' nothin', 'cause they was skeered to say anything. Jack's men was 'round in the crowd, an' durin' the time I was in these parts I saw so damn' much I can read

the folks of Seven Trumps like a newspaper. If somebody had started a lota squawkin' they mighta got a knife oozed in 'em, gentle-like an' without much racket, yuh see."

The Rio Kid had saddled his mare and had left them as darkness settled. Where he was going or how long he would be gone he had not said. It was after ten o'clock now. Interest in the poker game had waned. Old Whistling Hank had sprawled back against the rocks. Gyp Marshall and Stark Corbey had taken no interest in the game from the beginning. And now the whole group either lay on their backs, their stomachs or sat tilted against the rocks, looking at the dying fire.

"I don't know what The Rio Kid's got in his mind." Gyp Marshall was speaking in a half-grumbly tone. "I don't know how long yuh fellas have knowed 'im. There's been a big space in his life when me an' Stark didn't have no chance of watchin' 'im grow up, but I can say this—an' Stark'll back me—that he's a duck what'll take yuh through the mill an' bring yuh out on top. He had a bellyful of sand when he was a youngster. He had fair play planted in his mind, too. Two-Gun Dave Steel was rough an' ready. He'd fight any damn' man, at any time, any place. He'd give 'im odds, an' take a fall with a grin on his face if it come to 'im; but he was square with them what was square with him."

" 'Tain't that that's worryin' anybody, I reckon," grunted Spooky Jim, finishing the making of a brown cigarette and reaching forward to pluck a glowing splinter from the fire. "Privately speakin', I'd say he was all hell an' dander until we struck that Lucky Bug stage outfit. After the shootin' was done he seemed to sorter wilt in spirit down there. I saw the gal, of course. Like the rest of yuh plugs did. Maybe it was the way she looked at 'im."

They were rolled in their blankets when The Rio Kid finally returned to the peak. He unsaddled his mare, found a place for himself, and lay there in the open a dozen rods from the others. Hours passed before he went to sleep.

At dawn, with Monday morning breaking clear, cool and still, The Rio Kid was up. He drank a cup of steaming black coffee, and once more rode away into the hills, this time carrying Spooky Jim's 40-power telescope with him. When darkness was settling he was back, but the old devil-may-care light had not returned to his eyes.

"See here, Rio, how are yuh feelin'?" Spooky Jim had been in a quarrelsome mood all day, but he walked up to The Rio Kid with a grin on his face. "Are yuh all right?"

"Why—why, of course!" The Rio Kid looked at him with sudden surprise. "Why? What makes you ask that, Spooky?"

"Dunno." Spooky Jim looked at the ground, kicking gently at a little sliver of rock with the toe of his boot. "We boys have sorter been wonderin' 'bout it. Yuh don't act like yuh did. Maybe there's

somethin' sorter gettin' under yore hide. I'm a fella with jawbone enough to ask yuh."

"I don't get the point at all," The Rio Kid looked at him quizzically. "What are you trying to say?"

"Well," Spooky Jim kicked at the sliver of rock again, "yuh sorter act like yuh was off'n us fellas. Kinda off like a dirty shirt, yuh might say. Don't hang 'round with us much."

"Sorry!" The Rio Kid looked off down the slope. "I have other things to do, naturally, Jim. There'll be plenty of things to talk about and to do a little later on."

"Yuh ain't woman struck, are yuh?" Spooky Jim's one eye looked searchingly at his face.

"Woman struck?" The Rio Kid's mouth opened. "What do you mean?"

"Well, it's like this, Rio." Spooky Jim thrust his big, red hands into his hip pockets, rolled a chew of tobacco from the left side of his jaw to the right, and grinned. "I'll be plain. I rid with a fella once what got that sort of sickness. It hit 'im quick, right when we had a job on our hands, an' he dropped us flat. Allus atterwards, I've been a mite watchful of the duck I'm ridin' for an' with. It's dangerous business for the boss of an outfit like us to sorter get mooney. I've been watchin' yuh, yuh see."

"Yes, but what about it?" A glinty sheen had come into The Rio Kid's eyes. "What are you trying to say to me?"

"Oh, yuh needn't get yore dander up so hell-fired quick, now," grunted the giant. "I ain't gonna fuss with yuh 'bout nothin'. I left my guns off, as yuh can see." He nodded toward a rock where his belts and his six-shooters were lying. "Yo're sorter high-headed an' high-strung, 'bout like a bronc. A man has to watch yuh, Rio. I only wanta talk with yuh."

"What in the hell are you talking about!" snapped The Rio Kid. "Get it out and done. Don't stand there beating about the bush. If I've done anything I shouldn't have done, say it!"

"As I said, Rio, I ain't gonna row with yuh. Not fight anyhow." The giant grinned slowly. "I just wanta remind yuh that us fellas come trailin' up in this country with yuh to sorter line our pockets with a little money. Here it is Monday evenin' now——"

"I thought we were working mighty fast!"

"Was, up until Saturday," nodded the giant, squirting out another stream of tobacco spittle and removing his hands from his pockets. "I ain't sayin' we won't go right on, but I only wanted to ease my mind a little. It's like this, yuh see. Since we had the hitch with that stage, yuh ain't acted like yuh cared much——"

"In other words, I didn't fill your pockets with money the first day we landed in Seven Trumps?" The Rio Kid was looking at him narrowly. "Is that it, Spooky?"

"Naw, 'tain't, Rio. All I'm figurin' on is just this: All I wanta

know is that yuh ain't gonna get off on the blind side somewhere an' sorter let yore dander cool down. That's what I'm drivin' at."

"Well, you certainly drive a long way around to get to the point!" The Rio Kid smiled blandly. "You'll get plenty of pay for all your trouble. I will see to that if I have to pay you out of my own pocket."

"But we didn't come here to take pay outa yore pocket, Rio!" There was a sudden glitter in Spooky Jim's eye now as he looked up. "We was pushed back from takin' gold off'n that buckboard——"

"I'm boss of this party, Spooky!"

"Yeah!" Spooky Jim's eyes widened. He bobbed his giant's jaws had hardened and his eye had become a round, shiny button. "When I think back of that, it still don't set so well. There was the gold, all ready for takin'. That damn' gal on the buckboard looked at yuh, holdin' out her hands, an' I guess yuh sorter got cold feet or somethin'. Yuh——"

"That'll do, Spooky!" The Rio Kid's tone was flat and hard.

"Maybe it will, maybe it won't, Rio." The giant took a step backward. "What sticks in my craw, though, I get it out. I've been wonderin' 'bout that damn' gal since the buckboard racket, Rio."

"We'll leave Miss Dell's name out of it, Spooky!"

"Yeah!" Spooky Jim's eyes widened. He bobbed his head with a nod. "So I step on soft spots a'ready, eh, Rio? An' I thought I would, yeah." He nodded again. "That's why I was just sorter easin' up on the subject. That gal was good lookin'. A fine-lookin' little devil even——"

"I said we'd leave her out of it!"

"Don't make me laugh now!" sneered the giant. "Hell, I was tellin' the boys somethin' was wrong with yuh. I told myself I'd find out. I am findin' it out, Mr. Rio Kid! Yo're woman struck, like I said. Yo've forgot about us complete. It makes me mad, Rio. That an' along with what was done at the buckboard. That damned little filly with her big eyes makes me wanta laugh. She——Wait! *Uh!*"

A pistol shot would not have done it any quicker. The Rio Kid had stepped in close. His right fist tore upward. There was a sickening *smack!* The fist had landed a flat blow under the giant's chin. A big, sprawling thing, Spooky Jim shot backward. He landed on the flat of his back, his heels flying up. With his spurred boots knocking a shower of sparks from a rock as they came down with a metallic *clang!* the giant bellowed out an oath.

"Damnit!"

"Laugh, damn you, laugh!" snarled The Rio Kid. "You said you wanted to! Now do it! I told you to keep your trap shut about——"

"Damnit!" A fine line of red was finding its way out the left side of the giant's bearded mouth. "Why—why, can't a man even talk to yuh, Rio?"

"Not concerning some things, he can't!" snapped The Rio Kid.

20

"I'LL ANSWER to you nor none of the rest of this outfit for my personal behaviour!" There was a ring in The Rio Kid's voice as he stood there looking down at the sprawling giant in the rocks. The old fighting glint was in his eyes. His lips were a hardened crack, warping out the words. "Get that straight, all of you!" He sent a quick, fierce glance at the others. "You tied your strings with mine down on the border. Zack Jefferson was a damned good example of what I'll do to any of you if you try to get smart with me! Get that in your minds. It'll pay every one of you to keep it there!"

"I—I wasn't lookin' for no fight with yuh, Rio!" snarled Spooky Jim, rising clownishly to one elbow and reaching for his hat that lay almost a yard away. "I told you I wasn't!"

"Yo've been tryin' to pick a row with somebody all day, fella!" Old Gyp Marshall was joining it now, standing there with his shoulders thrown back and his long, wrinkled neck bent forward. "When yuh started with yore mouth music to Lit—er—to Rio, I knowed yuh would get what yuh had comin' to yuh."

"Whatnahell have yuh got to do with it?" sneered Spooky Jim, rolling his head to one side to look at him.

"Heaps, maybe!" put in Stark Corbey, standing up from a flat-topped boulder where he had been sitting as still as an old, grey-whiskered rat through all of it. "Sometimes a fella can make it his business in 'most any sort of a row!"

"Cut it!" snapped The Rio Kid. "Sit down, Gyp! Sit down, Stark! I won't stand for *anybody* butting into a job when I'm doing it!"

"Me an' Gyp don't aim to make it a three agin one thing, son!" growled Corbey. "Spooky Jim has his friends. This half-breed fella an' the squirt with his fancy feather in his hair might horn in."

"An' then it'll be just too damn' bad when they do!" snapped Big Mike Logan as he stood up with old Whistling Hank beside him. "I——"

"Sit down!" The file-on-steel rasp had come into The Rio Kid's tone. "All of you! And you, Spooky, get on your feet!"

"The trouble with yuh, Spooky," hiss-whistled old Hank, "is that yuh ain't got sense enough to get out of even a polecat's way. Yuh an' me has rid a heap together. Chances are we'll ride some more the same way, but yo're allus the same. Windy mouthed, stickin' yore bill in where it don't belong."

"Now yuh ducks say somethin' an' yo'll all have had a pick at me!" roared the giant, pointing his finger at Choctaw Charley and Tom the Piper. Tom the Piper shrugged, pinching his blanket tighter around him. Choctaw Charley grinned. "Damn 'f I won't get to believin', m'self, that I'm plain loco if yuh all keep talkin'."

As the deeper shadows of darkness settled over the hills The Rio Kid was again riding down the slopes of The Eagle's Saddle. The mare picked her way gingerly along, mounting a jackpined knoll east of Seven Trumps. The Rio Kid pulled her to a halt, and sat there in his saddle as still as a statue while he studied the glowing squares of yellow light in the houses and buildings below him.

"You can come any time!"

He was out of his saddle suddenly. The pine-covered knoll was almost a half-mile from the Dell house, but under the trees the grass was thick and green. He slipped his saddle from the mare and staked her with his lariat. Then he was leaving her, squaring his shoulders as he walked on down the hill, keeping in the shadow of the trees.

The lights of Tipton Dell's house were showing through the trees ahead a short time later. Down on a little flat, he paused in the shadow of a giant cottonwood beside a soggy depression in the ground, and stood there looking at the house. He was doubtful of himself. Sunday night had found him back at the Dell home, and now he was going back again—and with no more of an outward excuse for going than he had had Sunday night. But suddenly he was squaring his shoulders again, tightening his lips, and walking on, steadily and as solemnly as a man marching behind an undertaker's carriage at a funeral.

Just what he was going to say, just what excuse he was going to give, had not occurred to him. He tried to keep his attention on the gravelled street. It was utterly empty and appeared as lonesome as a tomb, with only a light glowing here and there. Aware that Bellmartin might have someone watching the Dell house, he advanced cautiously, keeping in the shadows. When he was close to the place he turned, circling it, the glinty eyes as keen as an eagle's eyes as he searched the darkness everywhere. At last, taking a deep breath, he was stepping up on the front porch.

At his rap on the door Nanka Dell opened it, and he passed quickly on into the deep shadow of the hall. She might have been expecting him. He found himself wondering about it as she led the way into the living-room where all the blinds were drawn.

"Dad is downtown," she told him as she took his hat and gloves. "He will be along in a little while. Sing Fang went off to bed with one of his toothaches, and I've had all the work to do."

"I hope I'm not a lot of bother, ma'am," he told her, almost weakly, after the girl had sat down on the old couch and he had backed boyishly into a chair.

"Why, you're not!"

She looked straight at him and laughed suddenly and clear. His hands tightened on the arms of his chair. He leaned forward slightly, looking at her with a light leaping into his eyes. A wild feeling rushed through him to get up, to walk boldly to her and sit down on the old couch beside her.

"You are welcome here when the notion strikes you to come," Nanka Dell was speaking with her hands clasped in her lap as she looked steadily at the crackling fire. "We are what you might call frontier people, Mr. Steel." She glanced toward him. "If you are a newcomer to Montana, you will simply have to get used to us. We Montanans are abrupt, quick to decide as to who will be our friends and who will not."

"Do you know," he had stood up, "that I have always believed that I was born in Montana?"

"*Believed?* Why," she touched her left hand to her throat as she looked up, "don't you know, Mr. Steel?"

"Er—no, ma'am." Now he had made a blunder, or thought he had. He looked furtively at the fire, poked his left forefinger inside his collar, and stretched his neck. "I—I don't know where I was born, ma'am."

"Oh!" It looked as though she was trying to steer gracefully away from the subject and was having a bad time about it. "That—that's odd, isn't it?"

"Yes, ma'am." He nodded, and wished that he could keep his confounded hand in his pocket and away from that damned collar. "I've been thinking about it all my life."

"Oh!"

That should have been enough. It was by far more than he had intended to say.

"It—it's a little cool to-night," he told her, at the same time conscious of beads of moisture on his forehead.

"Yes, it is, slightly," she smiled. "Would you like to move your chair up closer to the fire?"

"Er—no, ma'am, I reckon not," he stammered and dropped backward a pace to ease into his chair. "It's real comfortable in here."

"Oh!"

He looked at her quickly. She was looking at him. In her eyes he caught the dancing sparkle of tiny, silvery lights. It looked as though she was laughing inwardly and almost hysterically at him. He squared his shoulders, stretched his neck, and stiffened in his chair.

"I meant, ma'am," he tried to make his tone hard and flat, "that it's cool outside, not in here."

"Oh, of course, Mr. Steel!"

"I—I guess I'd better go, ma'am." He stood up. "I——"

"Why?" Nanka Dell had come to her feet lightly. "Why, you have only come, Mr. Steel."

"Yes, ma'am," the old fighting glint had come into his eyes, "but I think it's best." He stepped quickly to the table. "I won't take up all of your time. It—it really wasn't important——"

"But you wanted to see Dad, and he'll——"

"No, ma'am!" he cut in, and there was sudden crispness in his voice. "I told you a lie about that, ma'am. I didn't come to see your

father. I—I came," he swallowed hard, almost chokingly, "to see you. There's no use in standing here trying to make you think anything else. I can take care of myself with any man, but I'm out of my place here, and I realize it."

"But you don't have to go!"

"No, ma'am. I reckon you're not opening the door and having the Chink throw me out, but I feel that I should have sense enough to get out." His face had become almost fiery red. "It's like this. When I saw you on the trail Saturday afternoon you looked like somebody I once knew. I guess, to speak as plainly as I can about it, you went to my head. Even one of my men noticed it to-day. But you're not my kind, Miss Dell. I'm no woman's man, mind you; but I haven't always lived as a man would have to live to find favor in the eyes of a woman of your kind.

"I've lived among bad men and border dives all my life." He was telling her all of it, and it never occurred to him to even pause and wonder why he was telling her. "Train robbers, bank robbers, gamblers and the rakings and scrapings of creation. I'm not much better, if any, than any of them. My life's been hectic, if you'd want to call it that. The fact is, I don't even know my own name. I was stolen, they tell me, when I was between two and three. Steel is the name of the man who stole me. I think I can remember my mother. At least I remember somebody who might have been, but it's so far in the past, so vague I can't be certain about it. You—you look a lot like the woman I remember, ma'am."

"Oh, but—but," the girl put out her hand to him, "you don't have to tell me all that, Mr. Steel!"

"No, ma'am, I reckon I don't." He glanced at the floor and the deep bearskin rug. "Maybe I was running away with myself. But there's one thing more that I do want to tell you." He looked up, his eyes appearing as hard and as shiny as chipped flint. "It might make you mad, but I just *had* to come here to see you. I'm a quick man, both in making up my mind and in the things I do! I've never tampered about with women. I've given them all a wide trail, but after I saw you," he stepped a pace closer to her, "the whole world seemed to go wrong with me. I could be satisfied to sit and look at you for the rest of my life, Nanka Dell." His voice had grown a trifle wavering. "That wouldn't do. You don't want me coming here and sitting and gawking at you. It might be amusing at first, but you'd soon be tired of it."

"I haven't asked you to leave, Mr. Steel!" She was standing against the old couch and he had taken another step toward her. Something in his eyes frightened her. "I——"

"No, ma'am, you haven't! You're too nice and too kind for that. Good women, they tell me," he laughed a hard, flat little splatter of sound, "are always kind to dumb brutes. I feel like one. I'm scared to death, for one thing——"

"But you needn't be!" She straightened slightly. "I—I'm only a weak woman, Mr. Steel. I wouldn't harm you for—for anything."

"Of course not!" There was a snap in The Rio Kid's tone now. "I'm not afraid of those who are capable of harming me! I have never been afraid. I—I can't understand why I should be afraid of you. If a man stood between us I could knock him out of the way without batting an eye. But there's something else. I don't know what it is. I've got an almost insane desire—maybe it's wholly an insane desire—to take you into my arms, to hold you up tight, to—to kiss you, ma'am. I've got a wild wanting to snatch you up and carry you away! To stop for nobody, ma'am! Not even your father! I want you like I've never wanted anything else! I'm no pinky-panky. I don't know how to go about telling a woman the things I'm telling you. All I can do is to blurt it out to you. To—to fling the words and let them fall!"

"I—I didn't expect this, Mr. Steel!" Wild alarm was in her eyes now. She was quivering from the little hollow place of her throat to the ends of her toes, and yet it was a tender quivering, a half-thrilling, half-delightful feeling that seemed to dance up and down in her body like softly caressing finger-tips. "I—I didn't know——"

"But you did know!" His voice was harsh. "Anybody could see it! Anybody *can* see it! The man I once trailed with used to tell me, 'if you want a thing bad enough and can't get it otherwise, *take it!*' That's what I'm going to do to-night if I have to fight your father before the sun comes up in the morning!"

"Don't! *Please!*"

She tried to get away from him. At first it was an almost frantic attempt to dart past his sudden reaching arms, but he caught her. He snatched her to him. She struggled once, twice in his arms, then her efforts were very, very frail.

"Oh, oh!" he whispered, his lips finding her lips, the curve of her soft white throat, her hair and her eyes. "God," what a woman you are."

Nanka Dell hung there in his arms. Her head was thrown back. Her eyes were closed. Her face was startlingly pale. Then suddenly, as if a cyclone had struck her, had wrapped her in its winding wings and had gone on away from her with a leap, The Rio Kid was leaving her. He had snatched up his hat and gloves. Without even looking back he was through the door to the hall, his bootheels thumping, his spurs clanking a harsh tune. The front door opened, closed quickly, and he was going off the porch, bootheels grinding on the gravel walk, the clanking of the spurs dying away in the darkness.

Trembling the girl sat down. She propped her elbows on her knees and cupped her chin in her palms. For a long time she sat there, gazing toward the fire. Her lips trembled. The shiny eyes grew moist. Suddenly she turned, throwing herself at full-length on the couch and pillowing her face on her arms. A sob shook her, then another—and another . . .

21

WITH HIS head up, his shoulders squared and his lips a tightly compressed crack, The Rio Kid walked briskly away in the darkness. Much of his old caution had deserted him. He scarcely glanced to the right or left. A terrible empty feeling gnawed at the pit of his stomach.

"Rotten!" he told himself bitterly, turning back to look toward the Dell house as he again halted under the big cottonwood by the soggy depression in the ground just below the base of the jackpined knoll where he had left his mare. "She should have brained me with the lamp or the fire-poker!"

Yet all his life he had told himself that he would some day find a woman like Nanka Dell. He had promised himself that he would keep his past hidden from her, that he would win her and take her away from all old haunts. Far down in the Valley of the Rio Grande, couched among slumbering old brown hills, the place was already waiting. Not one of his few old associates knew of it. It was there in a little valley all of its own—a rambling old abode with slender vines as frail as cobwebs clinging to the faded-pink walls and winding walks shaded by giant old pepper trees that lifted heaven-imploring arms to the blue sky. It was a deep, well-watered little valley where the streams whispered, where the green billows of grass stretched away to the horizon and fine herds of cattle and horses—bought and paid for, and carrying his own brands—grazed back in the surrounding hills and deep arroyos. There, he had so often told himself, he would some day take his woman.

He laughed bitterly as he reached the top of the knoll and started saddling his mare. What a mess he had made of things! Spooky Jim, he reasoned, could not have made a worse fool of himself. Spooky would have gone about it exactly as he had done. Only Spooky Jim would have laughed it off when it had all been over. It would have been easy for Spooky, something to throw his massive shoulders back and to brag about in a crowd! The Rio Kid cursed himself, pulled his hat tighter on his head, and swung into his saddle. The mare reared from an old habit and plunged with him. He slammed his rowels against her ribs and spoke to her gruffly, then he whirled her, and rode on among the trees.

Leaving the slope he kept within the shadow of other trees as he headed toward Honest Jack Bellmartin's stables and corrals. When he was fifty yards from them he pulled up in the shadows of a thicket of jackpines, and was again out of his saddle. This time he merely dropped his reins, squared his shoulders, slid Old Two-Gun Dave Steel's six-shooters a trifle forward on their belts and walked away.

Screened by brush and bushes he came up on the southeast corner of the corrals. He stood there for a few moments, listening. Horses snorted in the stables. A half-dozen were busy at a big hay-stack in a corral to his right. He watched them for a few seconds, and again turned to look closely at the stables; then he slipped through the poles of the corral, and walked on noiselessly across the bare, hoof-packed ground.

"What time yuh fellas figure on takin' out?" The voice came from the open doorway of a little planked-up lean-to room at the end of the stables. Stepping to one side quickly The Rio Kid halted in the shadows.

" 'Bout noon, Barney." A second voice was answering the first with a slow drawl. "Headin' north, for Wolf Crick Crossin', of course. Jack's figurin' on about twenty-five thousan' bein' in the box. Not goin' to make much noise 'bout it, though he'll load it, naturally, in plain sight so's a lot on the street can see what's goin' out. It'll make things hang together better, yuh see."

"Mighty 'round about way of baitin' a trap to catch a man, ain't it?"

"It only looks thataway, Barney. Jack's playin' a high tune for the favour of Seven Trumps, yuh see. Playin' it up strong so's Long Sam can have all the rope he wants to work with. There's a heap more to it than I'm tellin' yuh, yuh see. Ain't got time to go into it all. Anyhow, my orders was just to tell yuh to get the broncs an' the buckboard ready. Say nothin' to anybody, of course. Too much talk won't do. Jack would probably be mad as hell if he knowed I'd spouted off as much as I have even to yuh."

"Uh-huh, they're sayin' he's mighty touchy, Andy. Still, I've been with Honest Jack Bellmartin a long time. He oughta know me——"

"Trouble is, though," cut in the voice with the slow drawl, "he's apt to forget it. Of late he's got a mighty bad habit of forgettin' the things we fellas have done for 'im. Never saw 'im so touchy!"

"He'll come outa it!"

"Oh shore! It may take a little time, but Honest Jack allus comes outa the holes he gets in. Beats any fella I ever saw, Barney. Why, his luck's with 'im all the time!"

The Rio Kid stood there for ten minutes before he saw a shadowy form appear in the doorway. A stoop-shouldered, long-armed man stalked away in the shadows. A heavy-set man followed him to the corral gate, closed the gate, and stood there with his foot on one of the planks until the stoop-shouldered man was gone in the darkness. The Rio Kid slipped out of the shadows. He crossed an opening quickly, and reached the end of the stables. As the man at the gate finally turned, The Rio Kid stepped backward into the dark doorway of the little lean-to room.

With a short, crook-stemmed pipe in the right side of his mouth, the heavy-set man came on, walking with his hands clasped behind his back. He halted when he was near the doorway, and turned as if

to listen. The Rio Kid could hear his pipe wheezing now, so close was the man. As the man turned and came on The Rio Kid stepped suddenly forward.

"Easy now, pardner!" he ordered in a low voice, jamming a six-shooter forward. "I'm liable to blow a hole through you if you start a lot of fuss! Get up your hands!"

"Why—why, *whatnahell!*" The heavy-set man's voice was like a surprised whistle. His mouth opened. The pipe slipped, dropping. "I—I——"

"Get your hands up!" ordered The Rio Kid. "Don't stand there like you're choking to death. I want your gun."

"What—what do yuh want with—with me?" stammered the man as The Rio Kid pulled a long .45 from his holster, shoved it inside his waistband, and stepped back. "I—I ain't done nothin', fella."

"Dry up! I want Bellmartin's saddle. The big, old-fashioned Spanish saddle. Lead the way to it."

"He—he'll kill me if—if I let that out!" The voice of the heavy-set man sounded as though he was about to break into a fit of sobbing. "He will. I—I swear it!"

"And I'll kill you if you don't lead me to it!" snapped The Rio Kid. "Get moving! You can't stand here and stall it out with me until somebody comes down that trail from the house. Move!"

"It—it's in here, damn it," whined the man, moving toward the door of the lean-to. "I have to keep it oiled an' cleaned up for 'im. Been one of my jobs since I've been here."

"Wait now!" There was a low, steely rattle in The Rio Kid's tone. "No monkey business, big boy. You'll strike a match. If you try to grab up something, then it's going to be just too bad for you. Do you understand that? I'll shoot you so damned quick——"

"Hell, I ain't all fool, fella!" snarled the heavy-set man. "I've leastwise got hawg sense. Yo've got the drop."

"Here's a match!" With the muzzle of his six-shooter pressed against the man's back The Rio Kid thrust a match into his hand. "Strike it. Use your head, too. I don't want to have to either brain you or shoot you."

As the light of the match flared up The Rio Kid saw that one side of the room, the side against the end of the log stabes, was almost covered with saddles hanging on stout, wooden pegs. In a space to itself he saw a big Spanish saddle. It was the only one in the room, a monstrous looking thing with wide, flaring skirts, a high-tilted horn and long, sweeping tapideros. The Rio Kid thought he knew that saddle as he watched the man take it down with one hand while he held the match tremblingly in his left hand.

"It—it's as heavy as lead," complained the heavy-set man with a whine. "Wouldn't own the damn' thing, m'self. It'd kill any hoss to pack it. Weighs close to a hundred——"

"Get it out of here!" ordered The Rio Kid. "Don't stand and whine!"

The man dropped his match as The Rio Kid marched him out the door.

"Go right on!" ordered The Rio Kid as the man halted in front of the lean-to and started to lower the saddle to the ground. "I'll tell you when to stop."

"I'll get my daylights blowed out for this," whined the man as they left the corrals behind them and struck the brush and bushes. "I never can make Jack see that I couldn't he'p it."

"Hard man to work for, no doubt," sneered The Rio Kid as he reached the black mare and mounted her quickly. "Hand me that thing. On this side, you fool!"

"It—it's heavy as lead, I tell yuh," complained the heavy-set man as he lifted the saddle and The Rio Kid caught it, resting it half across his lap and half on the mare's neck. "Yore hoss is apt to throw yuh with that thing ridin' like that."

"No danger! Now get back to your place—or go report to Jack Bellmartin. Tell him the man the saddle rightfully belongs to came and got it. Understand that? Tell him the man who *rightfully owns* the saddle came here and took it away from you!"

"Why—why, yuh don't own that damned saddle, fella!" By the light from the sky The Rio Kid saw that the man's face had suddenly wrinkled with a nervous grin. "I know that much m'self!"

"You know it?"

"Shore, I know it!" nodded the man. "Me an' my brother made that thing, mister. My brother's a saddler in Wolf Crick Crossin'. Yes, sir." He bobbed his head, positively. "Two years ago, it was, this fall. We——"

"You're a liar!" hissed The Rio Kid, leaning forward.

"But I'm not!" declared the heavy-set man. "So he'p me, Gawd, I'm tellin' yuh the truth, mister. Now, Jack did have a saddle a heap like that un. Fact is, the gold an' silver on this saddle come off'n the one Jack had. This saddle's a duplicate from tree to stirrups. My brother charged 'im seven hundred dollars for the job. Hell, ever'-body in Seven Trumps knows about it. I was workin' with my brother then. Jack brought in a saddle all smashed up. Hoss had fell on it. Saddle was old, anyhow. Cantle an' horn was busted, smashed as complete as yuh coulda done it with a ton of rock fallin' on it. We made a new job out an' out, all except the trimmin's. A jeweller had to straighten up some of the silver an' gold. About all that this saddle likes of bein' exact to the old one is that the horn ain't quite so big. 'Tain't quite as heavy, either, as the old one, though Gawd knows it's heavy enough.—Why, what the matter, fella?"

The Rio Kid had passed a hand across his face. The man's words were true. He knew they were true! He had felt the horn of the saddle. The old bullet mark was not there. With his six-shooter

jammed back in his holster he looked closer at the saddle. The cantle of the original saddle had been covered with black coltskin with the hair left on. Thin, smooth calfskin covered the cantle of the saddle he now held there on the mare in front of him. He slipped his hands down over the flaring skirts. An ace of spades, made from the same skin that had covered the original saddle's cantle, was missing. With a sudden oath The Rio Kid flung the saddle from in front of him, allowing it to go tumbling and sprawling to the ground.

"Hell!" He seemed to bite the word out of his mouth. Whirling the mare, he slammed his rowels against her ribs, and galloped away.

"Well, I'll be blowed!" grunted the heavy-set man, turning now to stare down at the saddle. "Took the wind clean outa 'im!"

"Mount your horses!" It was Tuesday noon when The Rio Kid gave the order up there on the side of The Eagle's Saddle. "We've got a little job on our hands. Don't get your sights raised too much about it. It's not such a big thing, but it's right in your line."

He had been away for most of the morning and had just returned. His men were sprawled around the long, flat rock with a blanket spread over it. Another poker game had been going on, but the men were now scooping up their cards and pocketing the little stacks of money that had been carefully arranged in front of them.

"You musta been out seein' somethin', Rio?" Spooky Jim grinned up at him as he pocketed a handful of silver coins. "Been watchin' Seven Trumps?"

"I have, Spooky!" The Rio Kid nodded impatiently for the giant to move on toward his horse. "This time," for a split-second a smile moved the corners of his lips, "I'm giving you buzzards a little of your due."

Two hours later they were swinging down through the hills ten miles away from The Eagle's Saddle and keeping behind a low, pine-covered ridge just east of North Gold Trail that led to Wolf Creek Crossing.

"The little deal we're riding in on is made especially for our benefit," explained The Rio Kid as they rode along. "I overheard enough last night at a certain place to know all about it. There's a job coming off. We're to get the blame for it to make an excuse for that long-legged sheriff of Seven Trumps to form an army of deputies and start trying to run us down. They don't expect us to actually show on the scene, and that's where we're going to agree with their plans and, at the same time, knock a hole or two in it."

Beyond the ridge, rattling along with a cloud of dust boiling up behind it, a big, shiny-new buckboard was travelling at a rapid pace, drawn by four high-stepping horses. With Whistling Hank now riding beside him because the old man knew the country ahead of them, The Rio Kid turned into a break in the ridge. As they reached the centre of the break, the sudden thundering of a volley of shots came

to them. The Rio Kid pulled up with a jerk that set his mare back on her haunches.

"Look out for some kind of horse-play!" he ordered, speaking with a sudden ring of harshness. "There never was a plot that couldn't be worked two or three ways. Watch out for anything."

"The buckboard's turnin' back!" hiss-whistled old Hank a few moments later as they rode on through the break in the ridge and halted behind a thick screen of low trees. "Whatever the job was it looks like it's done been done, Rio. Look."

The stage had already turned. Four men in masks were backing away from it with six-shooters in their hands. A fifth man—a burly, black-bearded individual who looked as strong as a horse—was staggering back in a high cluster of boulders with a heavy box. The buckboard, the driver, two guards and a passenger had just wheeled out of sight. The Rio Kid caught a glimpse of it a few moments later as it flashed out from behind low trees and bounced and swayed over a little rise.

"All right," he whispered. "Watch your steps. Gyp, you and Stark get out your Winchesters and keep back to cover us from any surprise. We'll take the works now."

Like wolves streaking forward, they were pushing on then. They swooped down through the trees, their horses running almost noiselessly on the thick blankets of pineneedles. In a few moments they were coming down on the rocks.

"We gotta duck it fast. Can't tell who might be happenin' to see us." The words were coming from the burly man with the gold box. "We——"

"Look out!" cut in a snarling voice, and a man was leaping back, clawing at his holsters. *"Look!"*

"Cut it!" The Rio Kid's voice was like a shot. The black mare had flashed in close. Other men were swinging out to the right and left of The Rio Kid. Six-shooters glistened in the sunlight. *"Cut it!* Don't try to reach for anything!"

"Why—why, *whatnahell!"* squawked a man, his hands flinching upward. "This—this is all wrong, somehow!"

"Naw, yuh don't!" snarled the voice of Spooky Jim. As it snarled a six-shooter roared in his right hand. A man spun half around, and dropped with a bullet through his shoulder. "Don't try reachin' for anything, yuh damn' fool! We'll blow yuh so fast——"

"We—we ain't!" wailed a voice, and as if it had been a command to the others, hands were jerking upward and six-shooters were dropping. Even the man with a bullet through his shoulder flinched over on his back, yelled something in a thick voice, and thrust his big, empty hands straight upward.

"Sheep!" sneered The Rio Kid. "Plain, low-witted sheep! Now, what a fine job you've got on your hands to go back and tell Honest Jack about! Get down, Hank, and open up that box."

22

"WELL, IT'S done, the plan's all laid, the stage's on her way. Now to set back an' let the cards fall as they will."

Sheriff Long Sam McGee had gone up the hill to see Honest Jack Bellmartin. He had dropped into a chair, crossed his gangling legs, and propped his big hat on his knee. Bellmartin was standing there, both hands rammed in the pockets of his dressing-gown. Walt Jefferson had come up from his room in the basement, easing into a chair across the table from McGee. He looked at the bottle and glasses on the table. Long Sam McGee looked at them. Both men licked their lips expectantly, and glanced up at Bellmartin.

"Go ahead!" There was a snap in Bellmartin's voice. "By the way everybody acts who comes here, you'd think that I have the only supply of whisky in seven thousand miles."

"Yuh have the best," grunted McGee, grinning broadly and reaching for the bottle and a glass. "The pop-skull stuff of the Walkin' Hoss is the best we can do. I've got some more news." He settled back in his chair as Jefferson reached for a drink. " 'Bout old man Dell. He's goin' from place to place, busy as a hornet an' has been since Sunday mornin' bright an' early. He's told ever'body to keep hands-off of all the ructions what might come to Seven Trumps since that Saturday deal. 'It's a case of bad-man fightin' bad-man, a kinda dog-eat-dog proposition.' That's what he's tellin'. A heap have taken sides with 'im. A heap——"

"Chalk told me that this morning!" cut in Bellmartin, chewing off the end of a cigar with a savage twist. "Wess told me. Bud told me. Needle told me. Steamboat Frank tried to tell it to me. I've heard it so damn' many times I'm sick of it; and now you're here with the same tale. All I'm interested in now is my twenty-three thousand dollars of good gold that went out on the buckboard."

"It gives me an excuse to build up my deppity crowd, don't it, Jack?" There was a snarl in McGee's voice as he settled back in his chair. "It sets us, don't it? It'll give us the needed excuse to do somethin' right out in the open, won't it? Why, hell, Jack, when this thing's ripe an' all set, I ain't doin' a thing but goin' right in to blastin' them birds ever'where I meet 'em. I'll hit the hills with my crew. I'll run old Whistlin' Hank, that Rio Kid an' the rest of his gang in a hole, shoot 'em, an' stop up their damn' hole. Stars alive, man, there ain't no law mixed in this thing this time! It's sorter a man-to-man fight. Dell only eases any doubtful pains I mighta had about it. We've got the crowd. We're set, we're ready an' waitin'. All we're waitin' for now is for the whistle to blow."

The "whistle" was "blowing" at sundown. Long Sam McGee had gone back to his shabby office, and Bellmartin's Amalgamated New

Era, Incorporated, stage now came whizzing into Seven Trumps and scurried to a halt in a cloud of dust down the street in front of the bank. Sitting there in a big chair at the main south window of his house, Honest Jack Bellmartin watched it. His left hand shook as he raised it to his face, rubbing it.

"There goes the crowds!" He nodded his head suddenly and half snarled the words from the corner of his mouth to Walt Jefferson. "Just watch them. Like a gang of dogs after a bone. Everybody wanting to know it all. Everybody talking! There goes Long Sam. God, but he can sometimes strut like the prize cock of the rooster-run!"

The driver, the guards and the single passenger were standing up in the buckboard waving their hands. McGee rushed up, joining the crowd. Now he was pushing his way to the front of it. Now bartenders and gamblers and hangers-on were coming out of the Walking Horse and running across the street in droves. Women and girls in bright gowns and short skirts followed them.

It looked good. Honest Jack Bellmartin sat there for thirty minutes watching the scene like a hawk. Now and then he nodded his head with sudden feelings of approval.

"From the jump-off it looks all right!" Bellmartin bobbed his head with another approving nod, and reached for a glass on the table. "It didn't sound so well when Long Sam McGee first popped the idea out of a clear sky, but I've about come to the conclusion that Long Sam McGee was right for once in his life!"

But an hour later, with darkness having settled, everything was changed. Blackie Yarberry came lunging rather than running into the hall. His spurred heels banged out a harsh tune as he came into the living-room. His dark eyes were wide and wild. His left shoulder was smeared with blood.

Honest Jack Bellmartin took one look at him and retreated a pace, his own eyes suddenly widening, his mouth sagging open. An oath buckled his lips, whisperingly.

Like a jumpin-jack Walt Jefferson was out of his chair, both hands grasping the edge of the tables as if for support. He looked at Honest Jack, then at Yarberry; then back to Bellmartin.

"Gimme a drink!" There was a snarl on Yarberry's face. "I—I need one worse'n I've ever needed a drink in my whole life, Jack. We—we was hooked, clean an' proper! We didn't have a chance!"

"What do you mean?" Bellmartin was around the table and after him as Yarberry snatched up the brown bottle and started drinking like a man burning with thirst. "What in the hell are you running in here and blubbering like a madman about, Blackie?"

"They got the gold, Jack!" Yarberry gasped out the words. "I——"

"They? Who?" Bellmartin's voice carried a screech. He had seized Yarberry by the right shoulder, whirling the bulky man half

around. "What are you blabbering about, Blackie? Who got the gold, you fool? Say it! Get it out!"

"The Rio Kid and his bunch," coughed the thick-chested man. "The stage wasn't complete gone 'fore they bobs in. I'm shot through the shoulder. They took the gold box——"

"My twenty-three thousand dollars!"

"Is gone!" barked Yarberry, flinching away from the gripping hand whose fingers had tightened into his shoulder like a claw. "Wait now, Jack!" His eyes widened until it looked as though they were about to bulge out of his head. "Gawd, man, I couldn't he'p it. Nobody could he'p it. It—it was so quick. I—I tried to get my gun. I—I had the box." His voice broke, lips trembling and eyes suddenly so moist it looked as if he was about to start sobbing. "I done all I could. I dropped the box. I reached for my gun even when I knowed it was only a fool thing for me to do, an' one of them devils shot me——"

"I'm going to kill you!" roared Bellmartin, snatching up a long six-shooter from a jerked-open drawer in the table. "I'm going to blow your heart out of your body! I'll show you whose gold to go out——"

"Lis'en, Jack!" The cry came from Walt Jefferson. *"Lis'en! Whatnahell'szat?"*

Hoofs were coming like fast drum beats. *Ka-plot-ka-plit, ka-plot-ka-plit!* They were banging down the slope, the shale flying. A volley of shots tore out of the darkness. Bullets slapped the porch of Bellmartin's house, bringing a bellow of hoarse cries from two of his guards. A wild ringing of laughter seemed to answer them, and the fast-hammering hoofs were going on down the slope to fall upon the head of Seven Trump's main street like a mad clattering of castanets.

"What is that?" snarled Bellmartin, his face as white as the face of a ghost. "What——"

"It's them, The Rio Kid an' his bunch!" barked Blackie Yarberry, unholstering a long, blue six-shooter from his right holster as he whirled toward the door with Bellmartin's bottle still clutched in his left hand. "They're hittin' town for somethin' now!"

Boom! Bang! Ba-loom-Loom-Bloom! More shots were rolling down the street. Men along the old board walks were yelling and turning to flee. And straight on, riding with all the wild abandon of madmen, the running string of horsemen curved in the middle of the street. Straight toward the Walking Horse they shot, led by a yelling figure on a handsome black mare. The old board walk thundered with the sudden banging of hoofs. There was a crash of breaking and flying wood as the swinging doors of the Walking Horse were smashed into kindling.

Men inside the Walking Horse were bellowing somthing an instant later. A volley of screams appeared to swell the building by the sheer force of them. There was a roar of shots, a spilling, falling and shattering sound of glassware. Then like panic-stricken mules pouring

from a corral, women and girls were rushing out through the broken doors. The gamblers, bartenders, and the Tuesday evening crowds were right behind them—a yelling, bawling and cursing flood of humanity that looked like a swarm of bees suddenly deserting a hive.

"Robbery!" wailed the voice of a man who was rushing across the street waving his arms like a maniac. *"Robbery!* They're tearin' down the Walkin' Hoss! *They're sackin' the house!"*

"Come on, men, come on!" rose the bullish bellowing of Sheriff Long Sam McGee's voice above the din. "We've got 'em where we want 'em! I'm deputizin' ever' man in Seven Trumps. Pull yore guns an' go atter that crowd of devils!"

"Grab a gun!" yelled Honest Jack Bellmartin, throwing off his dressing-gown. "Tell everybody to unlimber their guns. Walt! Tell the guards! Tell everybody! Here's where we finish this thing for once and always!"

23

COMPLETELY abandoned by The Rio Kid and his men the Walking Horse was going to pieces. The big old iron safe in the little office room at the head of the long bar had been found open. Choctaw Charley had seen it the first thing, and, going off his horse with a yell, his looting hands had swept it clean. Spooky Jim had pounced upon one of the cash registers. Tom the Piper, with his feather spinning, had cleaned out the drawers of the other. Tables and chairs were going down now. Ropes bit through the air, catching the bar. There was a snorting of horses, a rending and crying of breaking wood, then a tremendous crash, and the bar was down. Now the backbar followed, going down, splintering. The old piano on the music platform came down with a bang, the rest of the instruments smashing. Now the lights were going. *Bang! Bang! Bang-Bang-Bang! Boom!* And the Walking Horse was thrown in sudden darkness.

"This way!" sang out a voice, and a black mare now led the way out through the back doors.

They whipped down a dark alley. Shots tore at them. A horse snorted, stumbled, and almost fell. Its rider pulled him up, and opened fire on a blot of darkness where the flame had gashed out. Then they were sweeping on, curving abruptly into another alleyway that led to the street.

There was no way to halt them. Scattered out, a howling, shooting mob of screeching devils hanging low over their saddles, they were tearing up the street with men yelling, side-jumping, bobbing and ducking to try to dodge them.

"Clear the street!" wailed the voice of Sheriff Long Sam McGee. "Scatter out, yuh fools! Give us a chance to shoot!"

"Look! *Look!*" screamed a voice above the roar. "The Walking Horse is afire!"

Oil from one of the lamps had started it. Red tongues of flame were running along the floor, licking up through the broken chairs, the smashed tables and the wrecked bars. And on up the street, vanishing now like mice leaping into holes, the marauding horsemen were quitting the town, leaving it in a panic-stricken uproar of milling humanity.

"Get at that fire!" The voice came from "Ace-In-The-Hole" John Turnbull, the Walking Horse's big, bald-headed, round-waisted manager. "The rain barrels are full. Grab the fire buckets!"

"Get them devils that have done this!" roared the voice of Honest Jack Bellmartin, appearing suddenly in his shirt sleeves with a six-shooter in each hand and a mob of men behind him. "Don't stand here gawking like a gang of hicks at your first circus! Get horses! Get in your saddles——"

"We're done a-goin'!" yelled the harsh voice of Sheriff Long Sam McGee, banging up the street at the head of a small army of horsemen. "More men are comin'. We'll rid these hills of them devils——"

"Listen!" screamed Bellmartin. *"Listen!"*

A thundering crash had come from the direction of his house. A yell of voices came rocketing down the slope. There was a crashing splatter of breaking glass. A red tongue of light flickered upward, bobbed, dimmed, grew bright again, and climbed into a flame.

"Hello, *Fate Grant!"* called a voice down the slope that rolled like a blast from a bugle. "You strutting would-be-bad-man down there who calls yourself Honest Jack Bellmartin! Your days are numbered. Seven Trumps is even now seeing the last of you and your gangs of cutthroats. You've robbed your last man in these hills. It's The Rio Kid who is cutting your hide down! Before he is through it'll be hanging on a bush! Now watch your fine house, a house you've set up here on blood and bones. This is just the beginning!"

"My—my house!" gasped Bellmartin. "My God, it—it's afire. Help, everybody! Help me! *Help me save my house!* Sam! *Sam McGee!"*

"I'm done a-goin' there!" bellowed the sheriff. "Come on, men! Come on ever'body! We'll get that mob an' save that house!"

With one gang fighting the spreading flames in the Walking Horse, another mob on foot—looking so panic-stricken it seemed that they had no idea of what they were doing—grabbed buckets and started after the cloud of horsemen at the heels of Sam McGee. But when the horsemen reached the foot of the slope a raking volley of shots halted them, started them scattering, and turned a man backward out of his saddle with the bones of his right arm shattered by a bullet at the elbow. A moment later a horse was going down, bawling.

"We ain't licked, yuh fools!" wailed McGee. "Keep advancin' on that house. Don't anybody turn back. Open up on it! *Start yore*

guns to talkin'! I'll shoot the first man I catch tryin' to turn back!"

Shots were raking back at the house now, but the flames were still mounting. It seemed but a minute before a long banner of fire was breaking through the roof. McGee, fighting doggedly, was closing in on the place, shooting steadily. In a few minutes more no answering shots were coming from the house, and McGee and his men were nearing it, still shooting and yelling.

"Gone!" roared McGee when he had finally come up to a point where he could see everything by the light of the flames. "Get busy, ever'body. Get some water. Save anything yuh can——"

"Lis'en!" yelped a voice down the slope. "What's that, Sam?"

From the direction of the corrals and the stables another noise was making itself known. Quick, staccato sounds of running horses came up the slope. The corral gates had been opened. Riders were rushing out the horses. Barney, the stable boss, now came panting and staggering up the hill.

"They—they've took over the stables!" he gasped, all out of breath and waving his hands wildly. "They've took over ever'thing down there. Look!"

Flames were climbing up from the main sheds and the haystacks now. In a moment the air was filled with sharp crackling sounds and flying sparks. A blaze broke through a roof and climbed skyward drunkenly. A blast of wind caught it, fluttering it into a roar. A yell cut the air like a knife. A roaring volley of shots came up the hill, the bullets pattering like sudden hail against the blazing red walls of Honest Jack Bellmartin's burning house.

"On, men, *on!"* bawled McGee. "Don't set here waitin' liked scared dawgs an' lookin' for me to tell yuh ever'thing. Get down there atter 'em! Shoot!"

"Shoot! Shoot! Shoot!" a voice mocked him in the thicket of trees beyond the burning stables and haystacks. Then it laughed a wild, ringing outburst of harsh laughter. "Why, hell, you're addled already!"

"Keep atter 'em!" thundered McGee, rearing straight in his stirrups and waving his old hat. "Atter 'em, boys! Don't lose sight nor track of 'em!"

"Come on!" bantered the same voice in the trees that had laughed. "We're now heading for Lucky Bug Creek Canyon, *if that means anything to you!* Hear me? *Lucky Bug Creek Canyon!"*

"Stars alive, they're goin' atter the smelter now, boys!" wailed McGee, slumping back in his saddle and fanning his face with his hat as he heard the racing and hammering of hoofs start tearing away toward the north-east. "Hear me? The smelter! *The smelter!"*

Somewhere in the long chase to the mouth of Lucky Bug Creek Canyon, Honest Jack Bellmartin, mounted on a long-legged horse he had taken from a hitching-rack on the main street of Seven Trumps, joined in the race. Like an army of dogs barking and snarling along

on the trail of a group of wolves, McGee's men were hot into the chase. Bellmartin found McGee near the rear of the riders, and at once broke into a fit of cursing.

"We'll never head them off!" he kept crying. "They've got the start on us, Sam! They're out to ruin me before the night's done!"

"But we'll get 'em!" snarled McGee. "Stars alive, Jack, can't yuh see that I've got more men in my string right now than them ducks ahead of us! Steamboat's back there in town rakin' up more of the boys. Steamboat'll be along 'fore we're much older. We'll get this gang. They ain't gonna have the chance of a snowball in hell, I tell yuh!"

"You've told me a lot of things, damn you!" Bellmartin's voice came like the sudden sobbing of a crazy man. "My twenty-three thousand's gone to hell. My fine house won't be worth a plugged dollar when it's all said and done. My stables are going up in smoke. God only knows what'll come of that fire in my Walking Horse. I've got a good notion to ram my pistol against the side of your head and blow your brains out, Sam McGee!"

"Yeah, yo're the tin-horn type who would do that very thing, Honest Jack Bellmartin!" snarled the lanky sheriff.

They were in the mouth of Lucky Bug Creek Canyon now, tearing along with the hammering hoofs of their horses sounding like shale pouring down the face of a cliff and the walls of rock on either side of them growing higher. Soon they were passing the rambling, sprawled out mass of niggardly buildings of old Tipton Dell's smelter. Bellmartin was still cursing.

"See here, Jack, yuh wait a minute!" snapped McGee, pulling rein suddenly. "If yuh wanta do somethin' to he'p yoreself instead of growlin' like a licked pup with his tail betwix his legs, then yuh turn back right here an' go head off Steamboat Frank. Take 'im along the old trail on the north rim of the canyon. Hustle him an' his bunch right on an' set 'im on the other side of yore smelter. We'll take it as easy as we can, sorter holdin' up the scrap as much as we can. It might cause them ducks ahead of us to slow down a little. But yuh might as well know it now as anytime that yore smelter's gonna go up like yore house an' yore stables——"

"What? You—you mean there's nothing we can do to stop it?" It looked as if Bellmartin was going to faint. "Why—why——"

"'Why, why,' hell!" mocked McGee. "Any fool would know that! Yuh might he'p some, but yo'll do it through Steamboat an' his crowd. Get goin'! Steamboat'll be hittin' the mouth of the canyon 'fore yuh know it. The boys back at the fires will tell 'im. Get goin'! Lis'en!" He jerked up his hand. "That's Steamboat an' his crowd now!" A rattle of hoofs had made themselves known down the canyon. "Get back an' meet 'em."

McGee whirled and jammed his spurs to his horse. Riding at a run, he was soon overtaking his men. They had come to a place in

the canyon where it was narrow now. The men ahead had slowed their horses to a canter. McGee cursed them.

"Keep up the pace!" he ordered. "That gang on ahead ain't stoppin'. They're headin' straight for the smelter. I——"

The roar of a shot cut him off. A bullet whistled overhead, crying like a voice as it passed on in the darkness. McGee's men yelled, jerking up their horses with fierce lunges on the reins and throwing themselves out of their saddles to dive behind boulders and clumps of bushes like scattering and hiding quail. Another shot whistled overhead. The bullet slapped the canyon wall and buzzed away in the night like a bee. Then somebody laughed in the darkness of the rocks ahead.

"Sheep!" cried a voice, and another mocking rush of laughter came out of the darkness and rocks. *"Sheep!* Why, you rats haven't the nerve of a louse! We're tearing your play-houses down, you scum of humanity. Before this night's done we're going to have every one of you travelling lame! We're not half through with you. We're tolling you out of your dens. We want you out in the hills where there'll be no bystanders to get shot up in the row. Before we're done you'll know what I mean."

Again there was a laugh, a laugh that rocketed down the canyon like a sudden blast of wind. Sheriff Long Sam McGee swore whisperingly. For some reason the very sound of that laughter sent a chill down his back. Crouched there behind a boulder he glared to the right and left. Then a sound of clattering hoofs came from up the canyon.

"Damnit!" growled a voice in the boulders to McGee's left. "Why, fellas, that was just one man what was holdin' us up."

"An'—an'," a man to Long Sam McGee's right was venturing to stand up, "he's gone! Laughed right in our faces! Laughed like he didn't give a damn 'bout us or nobody else—an' rid off an' left us squattin' here!"

24

BUT THE Rio Kid had no intention of firing the smelter. His scheme was not simply a scheme of laying waste. The smelter was something that could, in the end, be returned to the people of Seven Trumps.

"And we're going to return everything we can to the people of Seven Trumps!" The Rio Kid had told his riders right after the hold-up of the men in the rocks with Bellmartin's gold box. "When I came here all this wasn't in my mind. I came to pull Bellmartin down by degrees, to sap him like a leech drinking his blood, and to just stand back and watch terror eat him up alive as he went down. That would have been his due, but I've changed my mind. I want

to get through and get out of this country as quickly as I can.

"There are some things you can do to men that will hurt worse than death," he had gone on, looking off across the hills. "Death's too quick for some people. A pop of a gun, a little jab of pain, and it's all over with them. We're going to take Honest Jack Bellmartin down in a fashion that will give him a little time to see what we really have done to him. We're gong to make him pay up!

"And you people," he had looked over the group sternly, "have enough gold right here to pay you for all your troubles. Gyp and Stark don't want any of it. I don't want any. As you probably know, I am a fairly wealthy man on the border. I have enough down there to take care of Gyp and Stark and let them pass their old days in peace——"

"Yuh can figure me outa it, too!" had cut in old Whistling Hank. "I got money in two banks in Texas, in one in Arizona an' one in Utah. I've got a ranch in Mexico, back in the hills an' plum safe from ever'body. Besides," he had scratched the shrivelled button where his right ear should have been, "I figure I'm grindin' my own little old dull-bladed hatchet with Mr. Honest Jack Bellmartin. That's pay enough, Rio."

Big Mike Logan had been the next to take sides with them. He had sat for a long minute in his saddle, staring at the hills. An infinitely slow little grin and a nod of his head had seemed to make up his mind. He had turned his head quickly, looking at The Rio Kid.

"An' I'm fixed, too, Rio!" he had agreed. "Better'n Hank's fixed, if the truth's to be said. If he can stand it, then so can I stand it. As well as he can, I reckon."

Spooky Jim, Choctaw Charley and Tom the Piper had sat there in their saddles a long time, looking sullenly off across the hills. They had exchanged glances with each other, had licked their lips, and had shaken their heads. Spooky Jim had spoken for them.

"Yuh sorter made us a promise, Rio." There had been an ill-concealed growl in the one-eyed giant's tone, though he had not looked at The Rio Kid. Instead, he had kept staring off across the hills with a wicked little glint in his eye. "Us three ain't got nothin' but our hats an' our hair, our saddles an' our broncs. Money means somethin' to us. It means a helluva good time somewhere else. It means fancy grub, fancy wimmin, cards, dice an' plenty of good whisky to settle our appetite. If the others won't take their share, then we figure this bunch of loot we've got here on our saddles should be divided betwixt us three."

"And then what?" The Rio Kid had looked at him narrowly. "Let's suppose you get it divided among you three. Afterward, from now on, what will you want, Jim?"

"From now on?" Spooky Jim had looked up at the sky, glanced

at Choctaw Charley and Tom the Piper, and then back at The Rio Kid. "From now on, Mr. Rio Kid, I reckon yuh can call any tune yuh wanta call. Us boys'll sing it. What yuh say will go. There won't be no question an' no back talk about it. I figure we've been well paid for all our trouble."

Cleaning out the safe and the cash drawers of the Walking Horse had brought them less than a thousand dollars. Wrecking the house, The Rio Kid knew, would be the worst blow to Honest Jack Bellmartin. His fine house going up in flames would be another slap in the face, though Spooky Jim, a hard devil to handle, had set fire to it without an order to set fire to it. The firing of the stables was but another slap in the face; and now they were going on, having pulled their horses down to a canter.

"Yo're shore rattlin' 'em, Rio!" hiss-whistled old Hank, turning to one side in his big saddle as The Rio Kid came galloping up after having halted down the canyon. "Bellmartin's feelin' like eatin' his own teeth right now. Why, I'll bet he's slobberin' at the mouth like a mad dawg! I'd give a hundred dollars to be somewhere close so's I could just set an' watch his face."

"That opportunity will come!" The Rio Kid assured him. "That's exactly what we're playing for right now. We'll shoot a few holes in his smelter buildings as we pass. Maybe we'll touch fire to one of the outbuildings that won't amount to anything. That will drive them crazy and allow us to keep leading them right on into the hills."

"Then yo're gonna do just anything to keep Jack followin' us?"

"Anything to keep him following!" The Rio Kid assured him. "And we have done enough now, already, to make him follow us to the Canadian line."

With their sweat-lathered horses cantering on, the smelter was soon looming ahead of them. The Rio Kid taking the lead, the group wound up a steep old trail, deep-rutted by the iron-tired wheels of wagons.

"Lis'en!" warned old Hank, turning to one side in his saddle again, his voice hiss-whistling. "I hear somebody comin' like a bat outa hell. Look yonder, Rio! Do yuh see what I see?"

Riding without even a thought of sparing the horses under them a cloud of men had appeared, thundering along in the growing light from the sky on the north rim of Lucky Bug Creek Canyon. Coming along like a strung-out Indian war-party, the riders were scarcely a thousand yards away, and from the size of the group The Rio Kid estimated that there were close to a dozen men in the party.

Pausing just long enough to drop off his mare and set fire to a small shack west of the main buildings of the smelter, The Rio Kid led the way on now with a growing sheet of flames climbing and crackling behind them. A hoarse hooting, bawling and yelling came to them. A burst of scattering shots splattered like falling glass from

the galloping riders on the canyon rim, their bullets buzzing harmlessly overhead. The Rio Kid grinned his little grin, and led the way up over the abrupt rim of a mile-long tableland dotted with low trees.

"Leading them on, leading them on!" he kept repeating the words as if only to himself. "I hope they won't catch the point when we get them to the place where I want them. They might balk."

"There's somebody ahead, Rio!" hiss-whistled old Hank, tightening rein suddenly as they were nearing the eastern rim of the tableland. "Look yonder, Rio! Straight ahead of us!"

"It's all right!" There was a quick little grin on The Rio Kid's face as he spoke. "I expected them, Hank. I've made several little visits into Seven Trumps, as you probably know, and made this arrangement."

Four mounted figures had loomed out of the bulky shadows of the trees. The Rio Kid's mare increased her pace from a touch of his rowels. In a few minutes, riding two or three rods in advance of his men, he was swinging in beside the four horsemen. At a glance he saw that they had come heavily armed. In addition to sagging six-shooter belts strapped around them each man was carrying a rifle or a carbine balanced across the saddle in front of him.

"They're coming!" exclaimed The Rio Kid. "Let's keep going. From the looks of things, your friend Bellmartin has about every guman he can muster at his heels."

"This is Burt Wilson, Mr. Steel," explained old Tipton Dell, as he swung his long-legged, one-eyed old black mare in beside The Rio Kid and waved his hand toward a burly, reddish-haired man on a big pinto. "He's postmaster of Seven Trumps. The other gent is Belton Clyde. The other is Rube Baker, one of the owners of the Two Forks An' A Gravy Bowl. I told yuh 'bout 'im Sunday night. These fellas wanted to come an' I figured they'd be a heap of company."

"Welcome to the party!" grinned The Rio Kid. "I hope we make it interesting! From now on, Mr. Dell, you had better lead the way."

"Glad to!" agreed the owner of the Lucky Bug Lode. "I reckon I know ever' foot of these hills. I've prospected 'em enough. Walked 'em an' rid 'em with about ever'thing what travels on four feet from a Spanish burro to a Missouri mule."

Shots were tearing at them a short time later as they mounted the bare back of a short ridge. Bullets droned overhead, slapped the shale at either side of them, and cried away in the night.

"Let them shoot!" ordered The Rio Kid. "Let them think they've got us on the run and that our whole thoughts are centered on a get-away!"

They crossed water twice, then struck an arid region of the hills. In places they pushed their way through tangled thickets of brush

and low trees, but they were literally branding their trail. At a word from The Rio Kid limbs from the trees were broken off as they galloped through them. At one place they swung to the right, deliberately riding through a long sand-bed and leaving the ugly, gouged-out impressions of their horses' hoofs in the soft earth.

Once they halted, making a faltering show of trying to stand off the racing army of horsemen behind them. Shots sputtered back and forth for a few minutes. The Rio Kid yelled to his men loudly as they appeared to turn their backs to the fight and gallop on. It was encouraging to the men below them. A volley of yells tore out of the shadow of brush and rocks.

"We've got 'em!" bellowed a voice among the Bellmartin riders. "We've got 'em on the go!"

"After 'em, boys, after 'em!" rolled the blustering voice of Long Sam McGee. "We'll have 'em cut down 'fore we're much older."

But another weary, hard-ridden hour passed. The Rio Kid's men were strung out now. At one place the roaring, bull-like voice of Big Mike Logan lifted in a lamenting bellow.

"Three of us are done shot!" he bawled. "We tried to tell yuh it was a fool idea! I told yuh we'd only get caught an' strung up on a limb, yuh fool!"

A spontaneous yell came from behind. The Rio Kid nodded and grinned his approval. If only their horses could hold out!

"Gettin' there!" growled old Tipton Dell a short time later as The Rio Kid thundered up beside him on his sweat-dripping mare. "Better bunch yore boys, Mr. Steel. It'll be sorter ticklish in a few minutes."

The Rio Kid passed a command back among the galloping riders. They closed the distances between one another by spurring up their galloping horses. Straight ahead of them a mighty black wall of mountain had appeared to rise almost suddenly out of the night. They came to the lip of a deep, dry canyon. They followed the lip for a thousand yards, then dipped down into a little, bowl-shaped valley. The black wall of mountain was right in front of them now.

"Get ready!" There was almost a snarl in old Tipton Dell's voice as his hand tightened on his reins. He had set himself in his saddle, old eyes peering at the wall of blackness ahead. "Here's where we slip 'em or we don't slip 'em. I believe the light's just right to do the trick. Watch yourselves, fellas! Keep a tight rein. This place is as dangerous as a bear-trap all set an' baited."

The cracklike mouth of a narrow gorge had appeared. Dell's hands tightened on his reins. It looked like he was riding right into the gorge. The blackness seemed terrible now. With a sudden twist of his reins, Dell was curving his horse to the right, spurring him furiously and slapping his down across the rump with an old Spanish quirt.

"Now!" he hissed. "Watch an' follow!"

They curved up a short, dangerous trail, and struck a tiny little flat thickly covered with pines. With a jerk on his reins and throwing up his hand, Dell had come to a halt. The old man was out of his saddle with a leap.

"Grab yore horse by the nose, an' hold 'im until hell freezes over!" he snarled. "Work fast, ever'body! Ain't no time to lose! We can't make a sound without spoilin' it all, boys."

Rattling hoofs were already making themselves known behind them. A cloud of horsemen suddenly appeared on the skyline. For an instant the riders seemed to be boiling over a sheer black cliff and falling straight upon them, but in another moment The Rio Kid heard them below him.

"Watch yourselves, you fools!" cried out the voice of Honest Jack Bellmartin. "It's as dark as hell down here. Look out, Sam! Watch where you're going, fool! We might run in on something!"

"Not a bit of danger, Jack!" There was absolute confidence in the tone of Sheriff Long Sam McGee's voice. "We've got 'em on the run. All they're atter now is a chance for a get-away. Here's the way. Follow me. It's the only way they coulda gone. Follow me, men, follow me! Don't let nothin' hold yuh back!"

With a noisy clattering that sounded like a spilling stream splattering from some giant waterfall, the horses were going on, galloping straight into the mouth of the narrow gorge. In a few minutes they were gone, the last rumbling sound of the beating hoofs dying away in the distance.

The men with The Rio Kid had stood there holding their horses by the nose so that the animals would not make a sound. They seemed to hold their breaths for a long minute after the last sound from the gorge had perished. Then a low, highly nervous chuckle came from old Tipton Dell.

"Well, I reckon my part of the job worked out about right, Mr. Steel," he grunted. "You've got 'em right where yuh said yuh wanted 'em. I reckon yuh oughta be satisfied plum complete, young fella."

"Are you sure," The Rio Kid released his mare's nose and had moved closer to the old man, "that there's no other way out of this place?"

"There shore ain't, Mr. Steel!" nodded Dell, positively. "This is The Devil's Paint Box. I've been over ever' foot of it, hossback, muleback, burroback an' afoot. There ain't a drop of water in it. The walls are so high only a bird could fly over 'em. Slick walls, too, Mr. Steel. Like I told yuh Sunday night. Slick as glass, by jinx! This gorge is a mite better'n five hundred yards long. Then yuh hit the old Paint Box complete. The Bellmartin spread have done hit it." He chuckled softly there in the darkness, scratching

the point of his chin with a nervous hand. "They're in a barrel, yuh might say. As good as in a barrel, anyhow! It's yore next move. What're yuh gonna do about it?"

"Why, we'll simply stop them up in there!" A sudden little laugh came from The Rio Kid. "Get busy, everybody. Get back down there in the mouth of that gorge. Stop everything that even looks like it wants to come out of it—unless, of course, some of their horses get away from them. Let the horses come. Strip their saddles and bridles from them, and let them go on back to water or where they please. We might be here a devil of a while, but if this place ahead of us is all that Mr. Dell claims for it, we've got our friends trapped like bees in a bottle."

25

"WATCH YOURSELVES! This is a nasty damned hole! I never saw a place so infernally dark."

Honest Jack Bellmartin kept muttering. All told, there were twenty-four men in the party now, and Bellmartin had dropped back toward the rear, allowing Sheriff Long Sam McGee to take the lead. In turn, Long Sam McGee had made an excuse for himself, and a big, wall-eyed man on a flea-bitten grey took the lead. Their winded horses had been pulled down to a walk, because the gorge had become dangerously narrow. Bellmartin's feet scraped rock on either side of him. In one place he had to lift his feet, so narrow was the passage, but a streak of light was glowing ahead. The leading rider came to the end of the passage, and halted. Long Sam McGee cursed him.

"Gonna set an 'hold us up all night?" he called out in a bantering tone. "Get goin' on, yuh fool. Don't set there starin'!"

One behind the other, they were moving out into an opening. To the right and left sheer walls of smooth black rock stretched away to skyward.

"Devil of a looking place!" growled Bellmartin. "They've got the start on us, too. Better watch ourselves, Sam. You can't tell what we're apt to run into."

Scattered out, they moved on. Shadows loomed ahead of them, and turned into tall clusters of boulders. Here and there they saw a tree that seemed to grow right out of the rocky floor of the place. Bellmartin cursed from time to time.

"Where's the end of this thing?" There was a hint of growing alarm in his tone when they had covered almost a mile and could see nothing ahead of them but another wall of black rock. "Damnit,

Sam, I feel like we're in a bucket or—or a big tub. Do you know where we are?"

"Never saw the place 'fore now." Into Sheriff Long Sam McGee's tone had crept a hint of doubt that caused Bellmartin to look at him quickly. "I—I reckon there's a place leadin' outa here. It oughta be—it oughta be somewhere here right close. That bunch couldn't a-took wings an' flew. They come in here an' there'll have to be a way for 'em to go outa it. I——"

"I don't feel right in this place!" Bellmartin spoke jerkily, and looked quickly to the right and left, then stood up in his stirrups, glancing back over his shoulder with his mouth half-open as he listened. "I didn't feel right when I rode in here."

"If the others come in," began McGee, standing up in his own stirrups to look back over his shoulder, "I reckon——"

"If the others came in!" snapped Bellmartin, turning back in his saddle. "We couldn't be sure! We took—we took a chance, Sam."

"Uh-huh, we mighta, Jack." McGee stood up a little higher in his stirrups, stretching his long neck as he looked around him in a sweeping circle. "But—but I reckon there ain't nothin' to get scared about. Not so quick, anyhow. I——"

"There might be a hell of a lot!" Bellmartin's voice had started to tremble. "We—we might be getting scared too late as it is. We may be in a trap, you long-legged fool."

"If—if we wasn't, yuh would try to scare us to death, anyhow!" A growl was in the sheriff's voice. He shook his shoulders, and settled down in his saddle. "Let's ride on. Settin' here ain't he'pin' things nary a bit."

McGee had tried to speak in a confident tone, but something had happened to his voice. Squaring his shoulders, he seemed to settle deeper in his saddle, and led the way on, but the further he rode, the more hopeless their situation grew. Only a small wall of rock was in front of them, and the same smooth wall curved away to the right and left.

"Some of yuh dudes come with me." ordered McGee at last. "The others had better string out an' go with Jack. We'll circle this thing, takin' it slow an' easy so's not to miss somethin'. I'll shoot my pistol three times if I find a hole, an'—an' we've just *got* to find one."

He rode on and on with his men following him in a strung-out line, but there was not a crack nor even a hint of a ledge to be found in the smooth, black rock. At last they were coming back to the place where they had entered. McGee sat there in his saddle, studying the inky gash in the rocks for a few moments, then rode on. Shortly afterward, he came upon Jack Bellmartin.

"Find anything?" There was deep anxiety in Bellmartin's tone.

"Not a sign of a place!" McGee assured him. "What'd yuh folks see?"

"A wall!" snapped Bellmartin. "One wall, the same wall you were looking at. Slick as polished marble. An eagle could get out of here, but a man couldn't."

"Then they've pulled a fast one on us," grunted McGee. "Yeah, they did, but I still don't see how they done it. We'll pick up their trail agin. It's back there somewhere, right close to the place where we hit that gorge. Can't be anywhere else, Jack." Some of his old confidence had come back to him. Bellmartin's fears seemed to have passed. "I saw 'em dip down. Didn't look like there was another place in the world for 'em to go, but we'll find it."

"I think," Bellmartin expelled a long breath, "I'll take a few of the boys and go back to Seven Trumps. I'm not doing much good out here. You can't tell what else will be taking place in town——"

"If yo'll lis'en to me, we'll have them devils 'fore we even think of goin' back to Seven Trumps." McGee was looking at him coldly. "Takin' men back to town with yuh only cuts down my chances—"

"Wait!" They were nearing the mouth of the gorge where they had entered the place. Bellmartin had thrown up his hand, jerking his horse to a halt. They could see straight into the passage now. "Look! What's that, Sam?" Bellmartin's voice had suddenly become a hoarse whisper as he lifted his hand to point. "I—I saw somebody strike a match!"

"Naw!" McGee's voice was like a low bark. "Yuh—yuh only think——"

"Look!" hissed Bellmartin. "See? *See?* The reflection of—of the light on the rocks, Sam? It—it's there! *See?"*

"I—I see it!" There was a sudden, almost frantic wail in the sound of McGee's tone now. "I—I—stars alive, duck men, *duck!"*

Coming from behind a tall boulder, a gash of fire had leaped like a sudden streak of lightning out of the mouth of the passage. A bullet shrieked overhead, dying away in the distance with a faint *zeem-mm!* A laugh followed it, a suddenly harsh blast of sound, full of mockery. Now came a voice.

"Hello, Fate Grant!" it called, and Honest Jack Bellmartin knew that voice. "How are you liking it by this time? And what are you going to do about it?"

"Scatter!" yelled Bellmartin. *"Scatter, everybody, quick!"*

Horses were snorting as the men swung them to the right and left. In a gone-mad army of lunging animals, the men were digging in their spurs and cursing and snarling. Bellmartin had wheeled his horse, steeling him furiously, and was heading eastward.

They found shelter where they could. Men tumbled out of their saddles, and like scooting lizards darted behind boulders or dropped flat on their stomachs here and there to crawl away in shallow de-

pressions among the rocks. Bellmartin kept going with Long Sam McGee following him. They whipped their horses in behind a cluster of niggardly trees, and dismounted. For a long minute Bellmartin stood there, his hands opening, closing and opening. Words formed in his throat, but they were only a gibbering of sounds.

"Don't rant!" snarled McGee. "Stars alive, man, I ain't got no cause to be blamed for ever'thing that comes along. Yuh—yuh know I didn't just lead us in this trap 'cause I wanted to be doin' somethin'! I don't like it no more'n yuh like it——"

"Start—start pouring lead into the hole!" Bellmartin's voice was still coming jerkily. He whirled, cupping his hands to his lips. "Shoot! Everybody! Get your lead singing!"

"'Twon't do no good!" McGee had released his horse. He took a pace forward, and laid his hand on Bellmartin's arm. "The Rio Kid an' his bunch are only a-settin' in that place, keepin' down an' outa any danger of anybody's lead."

But Honest Jack Bellmartin would not listen. In a few moments his men were firing into the mouth of the passage, their bullets *zip-zip*-ing in the rocks and whining. As if for an answer, the reflected light of a match showed on the walls of the gorge.

"Save yore lead!" bellowed McGee, cupping his hands to his mouth. "Save it, boys. Yo're only wastin' it! Let up! *Let up!*"

"You done it, you long-legged pin-head! You done it!" With a six-shooter in his right hand, Bellmartin had suddenly whirled upon McGee there in the trees! He jammed the six-shooter forward, burying its muzzle in the sheriff's stomach. His face had become the face of a scowling beast. McGee glared at it in the moonlight, and tried to step away from him. "You done it! I should have killed you long ago, Sam McGee. I'm going to kill you, you long-legged imp of hell!"

"Wait, now—now, Jack!" Growing fear shook McGee's voice. His lips trembled. Slowly he was lifting his hands. His eyes had widened. He started to take another step backward, but the pressing muzzle of the six-shooter seemed to draw him to it. "Don't—don't get—don't get rattled. I—I'm yore friend, Jack. Gawd, man, don't —don't yuh know I wouldn't double-cross yuh in—in anything"

"You'd do anything if there was any money in it for yourself! I'm going to make sure. I'm going to kill your soul, Long Sam McGee! I——"

"Naw, yuh don't do that, Jack Bellmartin!" Needle VanNess had come up in the shadows. A long Colt had slid forward. Its muzzle buried itself hard against Bellmartin's backbone. "When yuh shoot, then I shoot, an', cuss yore cringin' soul all to hell an' glory, fella, I'll tear yuh in two!"

"Don't—don't do it, Needle!" McGee spoke half-whisperingly. "Don't do nothin'—nothin' we might all be sorry we done!"

"I'm tired of his long-winded lip, I am!" There was deep finality in the tone of Needle VanNess. His voice sounded as if he was on the verge of crying. "We've been cussed an' bossed 'round by this fine-aired plug long enough. We've played the game with this plug, Sam. We've done his damned jobs, half the time without gettin' a plugged nickel outa 'em. We've stood the gaff while he set 'way back in the clear takin' it easy. We've seen men kicked outa his string who was as loyal as we've been. We've seen 'em get their walkin' papers an' have to duck it. We've knowed where we've stood all along the line. Shootin' yuh like I'd shoot a big, blowin' bullsnake won't hurt me a bit, Jack Bellmartin! Shootin' yuh——"

"Don't—don't do it, Needle!" Honest Jack Bellmartin had started to plead now. His right hand had sagged. The muzzle of the six-shooter had dropped from Long Sam McGee's stomach. "I—I guess—I guess we're all rattled and can't—can't think——"

"Yuh are a dirty, lyin', low-down whelp!" hissed VanNess. "Yo're the meanest, lyin'est piece of human scum I ever tied my strings with. Yore own thick head is the head what's rattled. 'Tain't mine. 'Tain't Sam's. 'Tain't the rest of the boys'. We know we're in a tight place, but we've got guts enough in our bellies to set down an' think it out. We ain't throwin' up our hands an' yellin' like bloody hell that it's all up with us. We——"

"Don't—don't shoot 'im, Needle." Sam McGee spoke gently, as a man would speak to a fretful horse on the brink of some dangerous chasm. "Me an' yuh come here together. We'll go away together when the time comes. But Jack ain't at 'imself right now. He—he's all rattled, like he says."

"But you done it," whispered Bellmartin, his face looking as cold and as pale as stone, his right hand tightening on the butt of his six-shooter. "You done it! You know you did, Long Sam McGee. Damnit!" his voice broke. "You—you've ruined us all!"

26

"THE WALKING HORSE will be open for business by the time the sun goes down to-morrow night!"

With a big, black cigar rammed in the right side of his mouth, a brown derby perched on the back of his head and his hands jammed in his hip pockets, Ace-In-The-Hole John Turnbull had made the statement a few minutes after the fire had been washed out by a bucket brigade.

Andrew Gossett, a big man of fifty, standing back in the crowd, had smiled. A quiet man usually, though a man who could play poker, drink whisky, carouse and dance with the best of them, he

had turned away. He had gone upstairs to the little room he had kept for himself during the long months he had been in Seven Trumps. Through the panes of the little window in his room, he had watched the fine house on the hill go up in smoke and flames. He had watched the light of the burning stables, the corrals and hay-stacks play like a dancing ghost on the hills. Below him the noise of the mobs and the thunder of hoofs beating out of town had been an all-drowning din; yet Andrew Gossett had gone to sleep on his bunk, and had slept soundly—as though there was not a troubling thought in the world to disturb him.

Wednesday morning was at hand now, a cold, frightfully still morning with the steely grey light of dawn awakening and slow-stealing over the hills like a glowing sheet of unpolished silver. Gossett yawned and stretched himself on his hard bunk. He pulled his watch from under his pillow, looked at it, and sat up.

At eight o'clock, he was the first customer in one-eyed Juan Garcia's clothing store. He purchased a black suit, a broad-brimmed black Stetson, a pair of square-toed shoes, a white shirt, collar, a tie, underwear and socks. He crossed the street to the barber shop, and—the first customer of the morning there—ordered a shave and a hair-cut.

Bathed and shaved, dressed from head to heels in his new clothing, Andrew Gossett looked like a stranger in Seven Trumps an hour later. The old stoop of his shoulders was gone. A big, square-jawed man, he stood there on the old board walk. Inside his waistband were two big, blue-steel .45's. He nodded to old acquaintances, and old acquaintances looked at him with surprise.

"Yuh got 'em all guessin', Andy," grinned the barber, coming out of his place of business to stand beside him. "As they usta say down in old Missouri, yuh look like a fella goin' to meetin'."

But Andy Gossett had no talk for the barber, and he left the man abruptly, walking down the street to the sheriff's office. The place was empty, the jail doors standing open, the rusty keys hanging on a nail in the corner. From his vest pocket, he took a fat, black cigar, lighting it. He took charge of Long Sam McGee's squeaky swivel chair, tilting it against the wall and propping his feet on the shackly desk, and sat there with his new hat perched on the back of his head.

At ten o'clock, he saw Tipton Dell, Burt Wilson, the postmaster, and Belton Clyde come riding down the street. A slow smile moved his lips. He puffed harder on his cigar, and sat up in the old chair. Wilson was turning in at the post office. Dell and Clyde sat there in their saddles for a few moments, looking down the street. A crowd was soon gathering around them, looking up, talking, asking questions. Dell and Clyde started their horses with a prod of their spurs, and came on down the street. They halted outside, and

sat there as if trying to look through the dirt-stained window.

"Get down and come in!" Gossett boomed at them when he saw that they were about to turn away.

Dell and Clyde looked at each other quickly. Then Dell was dismounting. Clyde followed his move. They dropped their reins, hitched up their belts, and came on into the office.

"Oh, I—er—I was lookin' for somebody," grunted Dell, halting abruptly. For an instant it seemed that he did not recognize Gossett. Gossett grinned, and a whispered oath came from Dell as he turned to leave the room.

"Sit down!" ordered Gossett, jovially. "It doesn't cost anything!"

"I was just sorter wonderin' if Steamboat Frank went out with the bunch last night?" grunted Dell. "Thought when yuh yelled for us to come in that yuh was him."

"He went out with the bunch, all right," Gossett assured him. "But sit down, fellows. I——"

"With what?" There was a sneer on Dell's face. *"Yuh?"*

"I might be good company!"

"Nobody, I reckon," put in Clyde, sourly, "ain't ever found it out if yuh are! We'll be knockin' along."

"But I don't want you to go!" Gossett had suddenly stood up. "I might have something to say to you folks that would be interesting——"

"There's nothin' yuh nor no other Bellmartin man can say that'd be of interest to me, Andy Gossett!" snapped Tipton Dell, drawing himself up as straight as a string. "Yuh know how I've allus felt. I see yo're all dressed up——"

"And if you were giving advice," grinned Gossett, "I guess you'd say for me to get some dust on these new duds by getting out of town as fast as I could. Sit down! I overheard your conversation with The Rio Kid Sunday night. Yes," he nodded as Dell's mouth opened with surprise. "I admit some things. I've watched your house pretty closely——"

"See here, yuh—yo're Andy Gossett, ain't yuh?" Dell leaned closer as if to get a better look at him.

"Of course"

"Yuh—yuh don't even talk like yuh used to talk!" put in Clyde.

"Sometimes necessity alters all things. I'm not any more of a friend to Honest Jack Bellmartin than either of you old roosters—"

"Naw?" Dell's eyes widened. "Say, what—what's the meanin' of all yore get-up, fella?" Dell waved his hands toward the new suit, the shoes and the hat. "Yuh——"

"I'm my natural self this morning," cut in Gossett with another grin. "If you folks wouldn't be in such a hell of a hurry, I might tell you who I am, why I came to Seven Trumps, and why I took

such a hot interest in Honest Jack. I'm a Government man, if you must know the facts quickly——"

"A wha-aat?" Again Dell's mouth flew open. "What—what—"

"Exactly! I've shined Honest's boots, washed his dishes, curried his horse, and made myself his handy man in general."

"Well, I—I'll be shot!" Clyde was coming forward now. "Fella, is all this uh fact?"

"Must be! I've raised a family on the cheques the Government's paid me in the last twenty years. Sit down. The name's still Gossett—Andrew Gossett. I was shipped out here from the Dakotas to handle this little job. By two o'clock this afternoon, I'll have a bunch of boys here who will come down on the train to Wolf Creek Crossing this morning. If you people haven't spoiled my party, I'll have this jailhouse full to the roof by twelve o'clock to-night.

"Your friend, Dell," he went on, squaring himself in the chair, "will probably come in with the others. Yes, The Rio Kid—or Steel, as I believe he calls himself to you. I've been watching your place closely. Yes. Too bad to have to admit it, but now and then a man must do a little eavesdropping in Uncle Sam's Secret Service Department. Sorry. There's nothing against The Rio Kid, but we want some of the fellows who are with him. We'll hold The Rio Kid as a witness. We have a right to do those things, Dell. Just to be assured of making no mistakes and to make a clean sweep, we'll lock them all up, right along with Bellmartin's gang."

"What—whatnahell are yuh talkin' 'bout?" stammered Dell, standing and scratching his head from sheer amazement. "I—I'm thick, I reckon——"

"Just surprised, Dell." Gossett laughed softly. "It's just this, if you simply can't catch the point. I've been here for months, watching Bellmartin and his gang. I've been eating with them, gambling with them, sleeping with them, riding with them—and being one of the boys, you might say. I came here to get the goods on Honest Jack. I got them. Just when I've made up my mind to pull the house down on them, in rides your friend, The Rio Kid. With him are some men the Government's wanted a long time. Two are escaped convicts, a couple who stabbed over a train years ago. I'm not so particular about picking them up. Don't really think I'd go out of my way about it if I thought The Rio Kid would take them down in Mexico or somewhere else where they wouldn't give the Government any more trouble. We want some of the others, though. A giant known as Spooky Jim; an Osage Indian, and a half-breed Choctaw. I know where they are. Know what they're doing. I've simply let them corral the Bellmartin gang—thanks for your part of it!—in the place you were telling The Rio Kid about Sunday night. All I'll do now——"

"Is to wade in an' try to take 'em, huh?" snarled Dell, his face drawn and pale.

"That's exactly what I'll do! Sure!" Gossett grinned. "I'll soon have my own bunch here. I've had everything set for a week——"

"An—an' yuh expect us to stand an' see yuh line up Steel, atter —atter what he's doing for the folks of Seven Trumps?" There was unbridling war in old Tipton Dell's tone now. "Yuh expect us to be a couple of stinkin' polecat critters what'd set back an' see yuh do a thing like that without even hurryin' the word to Steel an' his bunch? Hell! Yuh picked the wrong bumble-bee to buzz for yuh, Gossett!"

"But I didn't, Tip Dell!" Gossett's hands had moved. Into them had come his old blue six-shooters. The muzzles of the weapons seemed to jump forward. A sneer had buckled Gossett's face. "Don't move. I don't want to have to shoot you damned fools, but I'm going to lock you up for a little while just to make sure that you don't spoil any plans of mine. Now, both of you!" the words appeared to ring out of his curling lips, "just back up toward those jail doors."

"But—but, dammit, man, I——"

"Go on, Dell!" snapped Gossett. "I don't want any trouble with you. Uncle Sam's behind me in anything I do! *March,* I tell you!"

"Come—come on, Tip," growled Clyde, moving toward the open doors of the jail. "That damned fool ain't got a bit better sense than to shoot both of us!"

27

MORNING AT LAST! Honest Jack Bellmartin watched the light grow along the high rim of The Devil's Paint Box. Bellmartin's men started stealing out of their places of hiding in the rocks. At first they crawled on their hands and knees, moving rapidly, and were like mice slipping and scooting from shelter to shelter. Later, as the morning sunlight flooded the rocky floor of The Devil's Paint Box, they grew bolder. At last men stood up in the open, contemplating the mouth of the passageway sullenly. Bellmartin cursed them. Soon the men were mustering courage and desperation enough to curse him in turn.

"There's no use in tryin' to work yoreselves in a heat!" Long Sam McGee spoke huskily to the crowd as one quarrel after another broke out among the men. "We're jammed. That's all there is to it, fellas. One look at this place, 'specially in daylight, is enough to tell any fool there ain't no way outa here except by the way we come in——"

"Then whatnahell do yuh figure we're gonna do?" growled one

of the men, hitching up his belts, arrogantly. "Where do yuh figure we're gonna get even a ghost of a chance for a break? Any man with one eye an' half sense could see that we ain't got no chance at all of rushin' that passage. One man in it can set there with a pop-gun an' keep a whole army stood off."

"A little time, my friend! A little time!" put in Jack Bellmartin. "Time does wonders. Something will happen. We've still got friends in—in Seven Trumps." The slight breaking of his voice gave his own words a ring of doubt. "After all I've done for them—"

"They'll probably turn their backs on yuh!" cut in another man. "An, anyhow, there ain't nobody much in Seven Trumps to try to do anything, Bellmartin. Yuh got men ridin' the hills for yuh, lookin' after yore cattle an 'other stock, but they've never been let in on secrets. Men like that can't be expected to step right up as free as they please an' horn in on our play."

"There—there's Ace-In-The-Hole Turnbull. John Turnbull is one who could——"

"If he had the natural born guts it'd take, yeah!" cut in Needle VanNess. "But he ain't got 'em. His skirts are clear. He ain't never gone out an' pulled no jobs. He's set back, runnin' yore joint for yuh an' keepin' yore string of wimmin in line. We either get outa here by our own hands or we stay here. That's plain to me. Ain't no use in us even thinkin' of gettin' help from the outside!"

Bellmartin glowered at him, then turned his head slowly to look at Sheriff McGee. A feeling of intense hatred for the entire group had come over him. They were not his men of old—the swaggering, bragging gunmen who had always stepped like well-trained soldiers to obey his slightest command. They were like cowed wolves now, wolves that had been herded into a trap.

"McGee brought us into this!" he snarled to a sullen-eyed group of his men as the day wore on into the afternoon. "He——"

"No use in tryin' that on me, Jack!" cut in McGee. "The boys all understand it. They know we just hit a snag. Last night yuh even hinted that I'd double-crossed yuh. Yuh could shout that until yuh was heard clear to the moon, but I reckon there ain't a man in the crowd what'd believe a word of it. I've rid with all these men. They've rid with me. They know me. They know me a damned sight better than yuh wanta admit that yuh know me."

"I'm glad yo're tellin' him where the goose hangs, Sam!" put in Needle VanNess with a sudden nod. "Ever-time he looks at yuh or me I can see his gun-han' get sorter itchy. His fingers kinda twitch an' crook. He gets that wild glint in his eye, like a duck looks when he'd like to pinch a man's eyeballs to make him grunt. Men like that'll shoot yuh in the back, boys!" He sent a sweeping glance over the crowd. "They'll play 'emselves as yore friend until the time

comes when there's a chance to do yuh dirty. When yo're least expectin' it, they'll down yuh!"

"Fools! I'm not looking for—for a fight with you fellows!" The words appeared to curl from the side of Bellmartin's mouth. His hands slid upward, his thumbs hooking themselves over his belt buckles. The old about-to-jump-spider wart on his nose seemed to bristle. "All these—these men know me. They know I'm square with them——"

"We know a heap, Jack!" Walt Jefferson, a man always ready to take sides with reckless haste with the winner, was joining in now, standing there wide-legged. "I ain't never been mad at yuh for it, but yuh know the deal yuh handed Zack an' me."

"Yes? Well, I'll talk to you later about your lip, Walt!" snarled Bellmartin, suddenly turning his back on them and walking away. "All of you squirts are acting like you're scared half to death. And you are, every one of you!"

But he was scared also, and badly scared! There was need for alarm. Hungry and thirsty, with the afternoon sun pouring down in The Devil's Paint Box to make it as warm as an oven, his men had sought everywhere for water. Not a drop had been found; and the want of water and food was enough to make any man dangerous.

The horses had long before started straying toward the passage. The men had been able to turn the most of them, but four had galloped headlong into the passage, and the men there in the passage had let them pass. A sudden rumble of hoofs now caused Bellmartin to whirl and look. A dozen of the horses, all of them unsaddled, were making another dash. A man tried to head them, but he was knocked down, literally run over, and the horses galloped on. With wide eyes Bellmartin watched them disappear. At the end of another hour, not a horse was left in The Devil's Paint Box.

"Keeps lookin' worser an' worser," growled Needle VanNess to a group of men in the corral-shaped rocks as Bellmartin came up behind them quietly and halted, unobserved in a deep little wash fringed with brush and stunted pines.

"It ain't us that The Rio Kid wants," put in Walt Jefferson, speaking in a low voice after a quick, furtive glance to the right and left. "It's Jack's bacon that that Rio Kid wants to fry. He wants Jack, an' he wants 'im mighty bad!"

"Yo're shore now that that fella ain't hooked up with the law somewhere, Walt?" demanded a dark-bearded man who had sat down on a flat-topped boulder in the center of the group.

"He ain't!" vowed Jefferson with a sudden bob of his head. "Ain't that kind. He killed Zack. Sometime I'll pay 'im back for that job—"

"But right now," cut in the dark-bearded man, pointedly, looking at him closely, "yuh feel like spreadin' the hide clean an' puttin' the natural born truth right where it belongs, huh?"

"Uh-huh, I do!" Jefferson nodded. "The Rio Kid come here for Jack Bellmartin. He as good as said he didn't give a single whoot about nobody else."

"An' is that fella a man of his word?" The dark-bearded man was still watching Jefferson closely through narrowed eyes. "Come clean from the shoulder with it, Walt. This ain't exactly the time for lyin' or beatin' 'round the bushes."

"If he says he's gonna kill yuh, he'll kill yuh!" Walt Jefferson spoke with absolute positiveness. "There ain't nothin' else about it. Zack knowed that. I knowed it. I tried to get Zack to hold 'imself, but yuh know Zack—leastwise, yuh *did* know 'im. The Rio Kid's what yuh might call a lone wolf on the border. He plays his own games. I ain't never heard no talk of 'im pullin' a long trail job, like a bank or anything like that. Gamblin' an' fightin' revolutions for the Mex Government seems his line. He's rich as any man would wanta be, I reckon. He ain't never took 'imself no woman, don't have no partners. Ever'body says his word's good. It's too bad me an' Zack got mixed with 'im, but we was almost up here 'fore we found out what his racket was gonna be."

"Why are yuh askin' all that, Godby?" rumbled Needle VanNess, plucking at his chin thoughtfully with a long forefinger and thumb. "Any particular reason? Ain't figurin' on some kind of swap-out, are yuh?"

"Just askin', that's all, Needle!" grunted the dark-bearded man, glancing up with a scowl. "I reckon there ain't no harm in questionin' a man. At the same time," he looked at the other man suddenly, "I reckon there ain't no harm in us boys thinkin' a little as we go along. Is there?"

"I reckon not," grumbled a voice in the close circle of men around him.

Bellmartin eased away a few minutes later. He walked on and on, and sat down at last in the shadow of a low tree. The sun seemed blisteringly hot, glaring down out of an utterly cloudless sky. Bellmartin looked at it, cursed it raspingly, mopping at his forehead. Fanning himself with his hat, he turned hopeless eyes on the glass-smooth walls that shut him in. Thousands of times he had looked at those smooth black walls. Thousands of times since he had realized that he was trapped, the old sick feeling at the pit of his stomach made itself known. He turned his head and looked long and thoughtfully at the mouth of the passage.

His face was very pale. He knew it, and he was conscious that his heart was beating rapidly. He looked at his hands there in the blazing sunlight, holding them out in front of him, and they were trembling. He cursed Walt Jefferson in a whisper. He cursed Long Sam McGee, Needle VanNess, and dark-bearded Finn Godby.

He had never trusted Finn Godby. In his heart he felt that he

had never trusted McGee—that he had really never trusted a man with him! They were wolves of the trail, quick-tempered, panicky at times—deadly dangerous. His hold on them was slipping.

Something had to be done. He would have to talk to them; he would have to tell them something to quiet them, to keep them in place. He started to stand up, but the sound of a spurred heel caused him to settle back. In a moment Walt Jefferson appeared. The man stopped suddenly, his hands jerking toward his chest as Bellmartin stood up.

"Hello, Walt." Bellmartin spoke in a tense whisper.

"Er—why, hello, Jack."

Bellmartin had stepped close to him. By an effort that seemed about to choke him, he spoke in a calm whisper. "Want a drink of water?"

"Do I! Yes, I shore do!"

"Shh-uh!" hissed Bellmartin. "Not so loud. Come with me. I—I found a place. Not much of it. Not enough for the rest.

He led the way. Jefferson tagged along close to him. They walked on among the stunted trees, skirting a low line of rocks that were shaped like a tumble-down wall. When they were well away from the others, Bellmartin halted, whirling with a grinding sound of his spurred heels to face Jefferson. In Bellmartin's right hand now the long blade of a knife gleamed like a flashing jewel in the sunlight. He caught Jefferson by the shoulder.

"Don't even look like you want to open your mouth, Walt!" He hissed the words. "I'll cut you down like I'd chop the head off of a rattlesnake! I——"

"Waa-wait, Jack!" Jefferson staggered backward a pace, his voice a hoarse whisper. "What—what's the matter. I ain't done nothin'!"

"Shut up!" Bellmartin's right hand had jerked forward. The point of his knife pricked Jefferson just below the heart. "Let out just one yell and I'll kill you! I heard what you were telling Finn Godby and the others back there in the rocks. You'd make the bunch turn on me, you lown-down whelp."

"Don't Jack!" Jefferson's voice was a hiss now as he tried to back quickly but carefully away from the point of the knife. "I—I didn't—didn't mean no harm. I—— Wait, that damned thing's stickin' me, Jack!"

"Stop your whining!" snarled Bellmartin. "I'm going to kill you, Walt Jefferson! I'll have no low-down trash of a man like you talkin' against me!"

"Damn you! I told you——"

With a jerk, Jefferson freed himself, but as he freed himself, the keen knife ripped through his clothing, tearing a long gash in his chest. As he whirled, Bellmartin was upon him. The hand with the knife jerked upward and downward. Jefferson screamed like a

woman gripped with sudden terror. The knife had gashed him down the back.

Bellmartin seemed to catch himself then. For just an instant he seemed to realize what he was doing. He grabbed Jefferson by the sleeve, trying to hold him.

"He'p! *Hee-l-p!*" screeched Jefferson, jerking and twisting to break away again. "He's killin' me! He's—*he's killin' me!*"

Men were running toward them then. Jack Bellmartin saw what he had done, the terrible mistake he had made. Jefferson would be talking his head off in a few moments!

Like an enraged tiger, Bellmartin lunged in close. The hand gripping the knife jerked upward and downward. There was a ripping sound of tearing cloth and flesh, and the long knife had driven to the hill between Walt Jefferson's shoulder-blades.

With a wail, Walt Jefferson's struggles came to a sudden end. He staggered, coughed, and slumped to his knees. He balanced himself there for a moment, then plunged face-first to the ground.

"Whatzamatter?" bawled a voice close to Bellmartin. He whirled, the wet-bladed knife still in his hand. Four men were rushing up. McGee and VanNess were among them. Bellmartin was staggering backward. He heard others coming, and recognized the voice of Finn Godby among them.

Bellmartin had jammed his knife back in its sheath. His hands snatched toward his holsters, but at a glance he saw that McGee and VanNess were covering him with their six-shooters.

"He—he wanted—wanted me to sell you boys—you boys out. "Yes!" He bobbed his head as if to assure them. "He wanted me—"

"I—I didn't!" Walt Jefferson reared to his hands and knees. A wild light gleamed in his eyes. He laughed croakingly. As if one lie was as good as another—as if he realized that he had but a few seconds more to live and would do all he could to down the man who had downed him—he spoke gaspingly. "He—he wanted me to —to sell out yuh—yuh boys! Wanted—wanted me to go see The—The Rio Kid——"

"That's a lie!" Bellmartin's voice was like a scream as he whirled.

"Easy now, Jack Bellmartin!"

Needle VanNess and Long Sam McGee had stepped in close. Their six-shooters lurched forward, the muzzles of the weapons pressing hard against Bellmartin. VanNess had spoken. He went right on speaking.

"We've been expectin' somethin' like this since we got in this jam with yuh. We've knowed from the start that yuh wouldn't stick when the time come for somebody to stick. We knowed if there was any chance for yuh to sneak out an' leave us holdin' the bag, yuh shore would take——"

"Wait!" snarled Bellmartin, stumbling backward as if to get away from them. "Don't—don't try to ——"

"We ain't gonna *try* nothin' but yuh, Jack!" put in Long Sam McGee. *"Grab 'im, boys!"*

Bellmartin tried to fight. He tried to get his hands on his six-shooters, but the barrel of a Colt came down on his head with a sudden *thump!* Pain darted through him. His knees bent, and he dropped.

"If it's yuh an' only yuh, Jack Bellmartin, that that Rio Kid wants," sneered Needle VanNess, "then it's only a fool what'd set back an' see all the rest go by the board tryin' to save somebody what wouldn't lift a hand to save them. Fetch me a rope, boys. Hurry up! I reckon we'd better wrop the gent up good an' tight. One of us then'll talk to that Rio Kid fella."

Honest Jack Bellmartin tried to cry out something, but it seemed that sudden terror—the awful realization of what they were about to do with him—had robbed him of his voice.

"Hold on now 'fore I kill somebody so quick yore head'll split wide open from the bullet I'll stick through it!"

Bellmartin flinched over on his side. With eyes like those of a dying man, he saw that Steamboat Frank had appeared and was belligerently facing the group over the barrel of a cocked carbine thrust toward them between two little shaggy pines.

"I don't know what got betwix Jack an' Walt Jefferson!" A deadly dangerous whine was in the big deputy's voice. "I don't care. Walt Jefferson was a snake. All yuh dudes know that. I don't care who put out his light. I don't even wanta know why. All yuh squirts are actin' like a gang of poisoned pups. Yuh been settin' 'round in a huddle all day. Yuh ain't been doin' nothin' but talkin'. Me an' Soapy's been tryin' to figure this thing out—— Stick that gun back in yore holster, Sam McGee!" The muzzle of the carbine seemed to flinch as it covered the sheriff. "I'm talkin'. When I talk folks generally lis'en. If yuh wanta die, just keep hangin' on to that gun! I——"

"Jack—Jack was tryin' to double-cross us!" McGee was finding his voice at last. "He—he——"

"Dry yore yap!" snapped the big deputy. "Yo're takin' Walt's word for it. Nobody in this bunch ever would believe Walt. Besides, it don't make no difference. If yuh tin-horns want outa this place, it's me an' Soapy what can lead yuh out. We found a way—"

"Huh?" The grunt appeared to come from every pair of lips in the crowd. Faces seemed to press forward. Sullen eyes widened. Mouths sagged open.

"I found the way, yeah." Steamboat Frank was going on. "Leastwise me an' Soapy found it. As simple as tippin' yore hat to a school ma'am, too. There's a hundred foot climb to make right over here."

He nodded his head to eastward, still watching them over the barrel of the carbine. "Me an' Soapy used our heads. The wall over thataway is soft. We took a rock an' cracked the outer shell, an' there we had a foothold right in the wall. We climbed up an' pecked out anothern. By now Soapy oughta be at the top of the climb. All we gotta do is to walk outa here, yuh might say. The luck's changed. 'Fore that Rio Kid knows it, we'll be right on 'im. We'll plug up the run of luck he's been havin' with a little lead."

28

TO HAVE Honest Jack Bellmartin, alias Fate Grant, in such a place was like having the whole world delivered up to him on a silver platter; and The Rio Kid had simply settled down to wait. With the passing of the long night and the coming of the day to pour its blinding rays of sun down in the passage at noon, The Rio Kid had grown restless. Whistling Hank, Gyp Marshall and Stark Corbey had grumbled at him about it.

"Never rush a thing, son," Marshall had told him as they stood on the little flat at the foot of the cliff. "'Tain't good policy. Me an' Stark's been outa the racket a long time, but we ain't forgot how things are done. Why, we've never seen things sewed up so tight! The rest of our bunch have settled down, lazy as yuh please. Nothin' to do but set 'round an' wait. Big Mike's watchin' the passage. Spooky, Choctaw an' Tom have another blanket spread on a rock. That gold they've got is burnin' holes in their saddle pockets."

Leaving the men there on the flat, The Rio Kid had found a mere goat trail in a crack in the rocks. He had followed it upward, carrying Spooky Jim's 40-power telescope with him. He had come to a great niche in the face of the cliff—a hole ten or twelve feet deep and thirty or thirty-five feet long. Beyond this, he had found a crack in the rocks. Up there, sitting on a little spur of a ledge, he had studied The Devil's Paint Box through a narrow crack in the rocks. He had not been able to see all of it, but he had seen enough of the west side of the place to know that Bellmartin and his men were there, and from the way they were gesturing and milling about, it had looked as though a quarrel was going on among them.

Three o'clock came. Big Mike Logan came blustering out of the passage. He found The Rio Kid, Whistling Hank, Marshall and Corbey there under the trees on the little flat.

"Somethin' goin' on in there!" Logan nodded his head toward the cliff. "Our birds are thinnin' out for some reason. I can't see the whole place, yuh know, but they seem to be driftin' over toward the east side. When they go that way, they pass outa sight behind a shoulder of the east wall. I first thought somebody had found water,

but somethin' tells me that it ain't water that they've found."

The Rio Kid took Spooky Jim's telescope and again climbed the narrow, dangerous trail in the rocks. This time, Logan, Hank, Gyp and Stark followed him. But up there at the crack, they could not see anything. Logan cursed when he took the telescope.

"If this place was only a few inches wider," he grumbled, trying to twist the long telescope a little to the right, "we could see it all. As it is, I can even see more with yore glasses down in the passage, Rio."

"But yuh can't see anybody from here, huh?" hiss-whistled old Hank. "Cut off from 'em complete, ain't yuh?"

"Plum complete!" Logan nodded, lowering the telescope. "Wanta try yore hand at lookin'?"

"Go down, Mike," ordered The Rio Kid, "and tell the others to be on the lookout for something." A flat tone had come into his voice. "I'm a man who always plays a hunch, and I've got one. I'll take Stark with me. You can take Gyp and Hank with you. I'll swing east, along the foot of the cliff, and you and Gyp and Hank can go west. We might find a place where we can get up on the cliff again and see what's going on inside. I didn't ask Dell about it before he left. Wish I had. But warn those fellows in the passage. Tell them they had better move back."

They were leaving the foot of the cliff a short time later. Spooky Jim, Choctaw Charley and Tim the Piper had moved back nearer the mouth of the passage, settling down again behind four big boulders. Immediately, their blanket was spread again. Spooky Jim tossed down a pack of cards. The Rio Kid looked at Spooky Jim, and frowned.

"You're paying more attention to your poker game than you are to the business at hand, Spooky!" he snapped. "It might turn out bad for you fellows!"

"Don't worry so much about it," growled the giant. "Big Mike's only rattled up yuh fellas a little. It's as quiet as a graveyard on a Sunday night in there, Rio. Ain't nothin' gonna happen. Them ducks ain't hungry an' thirsty enough to start anything yet. Wait until about to-morrow or the next day, then we'll catch it for fair."

"It might turn out to be your own hard luck that you're playing to!" The Rio Kid warned him. "Remember it if something breaks."

"Oh, shore, shore!" Spooky Jim grinned. "Pile your money down, Tom. A tom-cat couldn't slip up on us here. A man can't move in this place without the rocks underfoot rattlin' like glass a-fallin'. It's yore deal, Choctaw. An', Tom, yuh keep that damned blanket back. I'm suspicious of the way yuh flip that thing about. It'd be a heap better than a sleeve to cache a couple of aces in."

The Rio Kid watched them for a few moments. His eyes grew glinty. He started to say something, but he was too disgusted with

them. He turned on his heel, and walked away to his mare.

"Nary one worth powder an' lead enough to blow 'im into his own grave!" growled Stark Corbey as they walked out in the little bowl-shaped valley where their horses were grazing. "Yo're gonna have trouble with them fellas 'fore yo're done with them, Dave."

"I'll have but one more quarrel with Spooky Jim!" The Rio Kid paused, looking at Corbey with a pale flicker in his eyes. "Just *one* more! I've made up my mind to that. The very next time I tangle with him, I'll wipe the whole slate clean!"

"Uh-huh, it's what I know. Shore, I know it, son! Then the half-breed an' the full-blood will stick their bills in."

"When they do," The Rio Kid's lips twisted with a thin smile. "that will just be too bad also, Stark! I'll save the Government a lot of trouble by settling all past-due obligations with a bullet right between their damned eyeballs!"

"Uh-huh, it's somethin' else I know," nodded Corbey. "When it comes, I'm hopin' it don't come when they catch yuh off by yoreself. Spooky Jim's a slick devil. He ain't forgot that slap in the mouth. He ain't the kind to forget it, though he's a kind what can act as smooth as axle-grease an' as sweet as honey. He wants to stick with yuh until he can get all there is to get. When that's done, look out for 'im."

They mounted and rode away. Gyp Marshall, Big Mike Logan and Whistling Hank set out along the foot of the cliffs to westward. The Rio Kid and Corbey passed on through the trees to eastward. They came to a break in the valley wall. Studying the cliffs, they rode on. They entered a larger valley now. Above them the black walls of The Devil's Paint Box seemed to stand sky-high.

They were rounding a sharp bend in the cliffs. High above them an eagle soared lazily against a background of blue. Ahead of them a small, black bear broke the shelter of a low line of pines at the head of a waterless ravine. With a *woof! woof!* the animal bounded away in the trees, going downhill with long, rabbitlike leaps.

The Rio Kid started to say something, but even as his mouth opened, he saw Stark Corbey suddenly stiffen in his saddle. The bear was forgotten. Corbey turned his head, looking quickly at The Rio Kid. His mouth had sagged open, his eyes widening.

A sound had come to them, a sound that seemed to come from far, far away; a low-rolling sound that seemed to rumble along the floor of the valley. They knew the sound for what it was—a low, far-reaching thunder of guns!

The black mare and Stark Corbey's horse whirled as if by a single impulse. A quirt came down like a hissing, biting snake. Corbey's horse snorted, leaping. Mane fluttering, her ears flattened, nose thrust out, the black mare was away like a bullet blown from

a gun. The Rio Kid was leaning forward in the saddle, stroking her neck.

"They've pulled a fast one on us, son!" Stark Corbey's voice was like a harsh fit of quick sobs.

29

THE SOUND of moving gravel, the faintest whisper of a sound, caused Spooky Jim to look up. Sitting there in the passageway on a rock with his cards spread like a fan in his huge hand, his one eye widened. His big, thick lips slacked. His tongue curled as if to say something, but it seemed that he was too fascinated to utter a sound.

Above him, on a shoulder of the passage, a figure crouched behind a little pine that grew out of a crack in the rocks. Hunched low, the figure was like a cougar about to spring, but in front of it, a little, black, round hole weaved. The lowering sunlight caught it, rimming it in a silvery halo no larger than a dime. Beyond the halo gleamed an eye. Below the eye a bearded cheek rested against the walnut butt of a carbine. In front of the cheek a gripping hand gripped, its right forefinger curled with a dirty-nailed talon on a trigger.

"Damnit!" With a lurch, Spooky Jim was coming to his feet. Tom the Piper and Choctaw Charley were throwing themselves back. *"Look out!"*

A roar shook the passage. A glittering gash of flame reached downward with a jerk, a gash of flame that was like a blinding ribbon of lightning. Spooky Jim staggered. A little, darting, deadening stab of pain had stung him heart-high. He reeled, but even as he reeled his old six-shooters were out. Like sweeping streaks of light he fanned them upward and backward—the hammers *click-clack!*-ing—and whipped them forward.

A double roar shook the passage now. The man behind the little pine lurched up. His carbine slid from his hands, clattering down. Reeling, both hands gripping his chest, the man was falling then, a sprawled-out, tumbling, cartwheel-like thing rolling down the cliff.

Spooky Jim staggered. A film of red was coming from his mouth. He looked to the right and left, dully conscious that the cliff was suddenly roaring like lightning striking close at hand with the explosion of guns. Tom the Piper and Choctaw Charley had gone into action. They were ducking and darting and shooting like maniacs now as they made their way toward the outer mouth of the passage. Spooky Jim felt something dart through his middle. Sick at his stomach he sat down suddenly. He tried to lift his right arm, but something had struck it, leaving it hanging limp and dead from the

shoulder downward. His left hand came up then. The old six-shooter roared in it. A man above him screeched something, slipped, and was falling. Spooky Jim laughed crazily, lowered his six-shooter to watch the man fall. Then a pain darted through his head. For an instant he was conscious of a terrible light zig-zagging in front of his face, and he slipped forward gently—and was still. The last bullet had gone in at his temple and had torn out the back of his head.

Tom the Piper and Choctaw Charley bobbed and ducked on, fighting with all the fury and wild abandon of tigers in a trap. Tom the Piper was the first to go down, shot through the hip. With a snarl he dragged himself on, screaming now with pain in his mother-tongue. Choctaw Charley was staggering a moment later, but both men reached a shoulder of the passage, dragging themselves around it and dropping down in a bed of boulders.

The whole world in front of them and above them seemed covered with men. Shots were gashing the air from a dozen places. Bullets whipped in against the boulders, splattering, whining, skip-skipping, and crying away.

With a long shot through an opening in the rocks Tom the Piper brought down a man. He grinned through the pain that gripped him as though the bones of his hip were being crushed in a vise as he watched the man start, lurch out from behind a rock, and sprawl face-first to the ground.

The end of the trail was at hand now. There in the rocks, with Tom the Piper down with his shattered hip and a bullet through Choctaw Charley's lungs, they were making the best of it. Like devils at bay they were firing. No chance was too much of a chance to take now. With bullets flattening themselves on the rocks close to his head Tom the Piper lifted himself a little higher. His old Winchester crashed like a sudden splatter of falling glass. A grin crossed his pain-twisted face as he saw another man stagger and go down.

Choctaw Charley was bringing down a man from the face of the cliff a moment later. A wail cut the air as the man was falling. In mid-air a bullet from Tom the Piper's Winchester found him, driving through him like a slender blade. The falling man struck the ground on his head and shoulders, caught there in a crack in the rocks.

And now from the east another rolling of shots awoke. Through the din, Choctaw Charley and Tom the Piper heard the vicious *ka-plot-ka-plit* of flying hoofs beating on the shale-covered valley floor. A carbine that seemed to have an entirely new voice crashed once! twice! three times! There was a yell, a bellow, a sudden volley of hoarse oaths.

Through the crack in the boulders, Choctaw Charley and Tom

the Piper saw a fine black mare with sweat-dripping flanks flash through an opening in the trees. Behind her trailed a fast horse with an old man lying low in the saddle and shooting across the running horse's flying mane.

And now from the west came another sound. Tom the Piper got one glimpse of three horsemen coming, then he was rocking back. His head rolled loosely on his shoulders. From the back of his neck and his throat a streak of red gushed, splattering on the rocks.

Choctaw Charley grunted. With a grin on his face he stood up suddenly. His carbine slid out of his hands. He took a pace forward. Like a blind man his left hand stretched out and felt over the rough side of a boulder as if caressing it. His right hand lifted to his throat. He gasped. Everything had gone dark in front of him. There was no noise, not a sound. In a vague, stupid way he thought he heard a cricket singing somewhere close at hand. He was not even conscious that he was falling, that he was going down; that the end of the trail had come.

"Ee-uh!" muttered Tom the Piper. "I am not afraid of this thing!"

Then everything was still for the half-breed and the Osage.

30

A RAGING BEAST now, Honest Jack Bellmartin had made his way down through the rocks. Many of his men were still up there on the cliff, but he had gained the shelter of the little valley at the foot of it. Steamboat Frank had trailed along with him, bobbing, ducking and darting from one place of shelter to another. They had come to a deep little ravine that was scarcely more than a crack in the hard ground. Brush and bushes grew thickly along the lip of it, and Bellmartin and Steamboat Frank had settled down to watch the fight.

"Look! Look!" Bellmartin's voice was almost a scream as he saw The Rio Kid and Stark Corbey suddenly coming into the fight. The men were in sight for just an instant, then they were gone, whirling out of sight in the trees and rocks. "I'd give anything in the world to get my gun sights on that man! I——"

"Not so loud, damnit," snarled Steamboat Frank. "Let the others have it, can't yuh? Our chance'll come. Hold yoreself."

"There, look!" Bellmartin had almost stood up when Big Mike Logan, Whistling Hank and Gyp Marshall came tearing down the valley and immediately curved like the whisking tail of a kite into a glade of tall boulders and low trees. "They—they're in it now!"

"Keep quiet, I tell yuh!" hissed the big deputy. "Can't yuh see that it'll all be over in a minute. Look yonder!"

As he pointed toward the cliffs Bellmartin looked. High up there

he saw Sheriff Long Sam McGee and old Needle VanNess. The men had just appeared from around a shoulder in the back rocks. Down in the trees and rocks where The Rio Kid and old Stark Corbey had disappeared the savage crash of a carbine lifted itself above the rest of the noise.

"Look!" Bellmartin gasped out the words. "Sam—Sam's gone, Steamboat! *Gone!* They've *got* 'im!"

Long Sam McGee had staggered. His hands flung out, grasping at a rough shoulder of rock. His carbine dropped. He was sagging at the knees now, and Needle VanNess was reaching for him, but even as VanNess was reaching the carbine below shattered out another crash.

VanNess was slumping at the knees now.

"Look at 'em!" gasped Bellmartin. "Look, Steamboat! *Look!* They're—they're fa-falling!"

"Hush, I tell yuh!" hissed the deputy. "My Gawd, man, ever'body can hear yuh bellowin' like a bull!"

Long Sam McGee and Needle VanNess, locked in each other's grip, were tumbling down through the rocks then. Bellmartin winced as he saw their spinning bodies strike a rocky spur. A shower of dust and spilling gravel seemed to rattle like a drum. The bodies bounced, appearing to spring yards high, and then they were gone, dropping behind another little shoulder, still locked together.

"The others are joinin' The Rio Kid an' the fella with 'im!"

Steamboat Frank seemed to spit the words out of the side of his mouth a few moments later as they saw Big Mike Logan, Gyp Marshall and Whistling Hank gallop their horses out of a big ravine and plunge into the rocks and trees. In a moment the firing from that point was doubled.

"Our bunch are turning their tails to it!" There was a sob in Bellmartin's voice now. "Look at them, Steamboat. Cowards! Rats! Sneaking, low-livered rats!"

"If yuh don't keep yore mouth down a little," sneered the deputy, "it's us what'll be runnin' next, Jack. Take it easy. We'll get our break. I took yuh outa that hole," he nodded toward the cliffs, "when yuh dudes had done give it up. Leave it to me."

"But there's enough of us here to eat these devils, Frank!" Bellmartin made the mistake of standing up suddenly. Steamboat Frank caught him by the coat-tail, pulling him back with an oath.

"Look!"

"I see as well as yuh see!" snapped the deputy. "Set down, I tell yuh, Jack. Yo're givin' me the shakes."

Another man had gone down. The Rio Kid and the men with him were literally driving the Bellmartin men into the mouth of the passage now. Realizing, probably, that they could get out of the place again, five men had suddenly turned. One of them staggered from a

shot and reached the mouth of the passage. Another man caught him, and they were soon bobbing out of sight.

"They—they're whipping us, Steamboat!" groaned Bellmartin, rubbing his hands fiercely. "They—they're putting us on the run. Look! There goes another bunch into that passage!"

"Shore, of course!" sneered the deputy. "Yuh allus was a kind, Jack, to surround yoreself with men what'd fight only when ever'-thing was up an' comin' in yore favor. We'd better duck it while there's a chance to duck it."

Gibbering, grumbling like an old woman, Honest Jack Bellmartin was following him on his hands and knees a few seconds later. They had to follow the narrow little ravine toward The Rio Kid and his party for twenty or thirty rods before they would be able to leave it and start slipping away through rocks and trees that would take them into the mouth of a deep, canyon-like opening.

"Wait! Look there!" Bellmartin's voice was a grunt when they were close to the place. "Who—where—where'd all that gang come from, Steamboat? Look—look up there!"

On the high rise behind them toward Seven Trumps an army of horsemen had appeared. New rifles and carbines glistened in the dying sunlight.

"What—what's the meaning of it, Steamboat?" hissed Bellmartin as he saw the men start coming down the steep slope at a gallop, waving their carbines and rifles and yelling something.

"Don't know," Steamboat Frank's voice was a low wail. "Look! There's Butch Hyde, the sheriff of Wolf Creek Crossin' with 'em. Damnit, Jack," Steamboat Frank almost stood up, "it—it looks like law to me. I——"

"Look!" cried Bellmartin, pointing. "What—what's *she* doing up there on that slope, Frank?"

Another sweat-lathered horse had appeared, a long, thin animal. A girl in a white dress had flung herself out of the saddle. She ran to a little jutting place on the rim of the slope.

"Steel! Steel!" Nanka Dell was screaming. "Steel! *Steel,* run for it! The law is here! *The law, Steel, the law!"*

"Damn her soul!"

Bellmartin's voice was a hoarse sob. With a jerk he had Steamboat Frank's carbine in his hands. He whirled, steadying himself. The muzzle of the rifle jerked upward. His smoky black eyes were finding the girl over the sights when Steamboat Frank cried out something in a hoarse voice. There was a quick, stabbing roar of shot. Steamboat Frank was lunging back from the force of an old .45 bullet that had struck him just above the left eye.

"Shoot now, damn you, Fate Grant!"

Bellmartin looked to the right. The carbine was still at his shoulder, but his eyes had become wide and wild. Through the trees and

rocks, not sixty feet away, standing there with his mare behind him, was The Rio Kid—the Little Dave of the old gun trail with Two-Gun Dave Steel. And up on the rim of the slope the panicky voice of Nanka Dell was still screaming:

"Steel, Steel, get away *quick!*"

Bellmartin dropped the carbine. He whirled. His thoughts were to run, to get away from there, but a ringing voice that was as sharp as an Army bugle on a frosty morning halted him.

"Hold on! You're not gone yet! Look me in the eye, Fate Grant!"

Honest Jack Bellmartin turned. He could not help it. It was as though the Arch-Angel of Eternity had called him. On his hands and his knees there in the wash he turned his head. Two cold, glinty eyes were looking at him over the long barrels of Old Two-Gun Dave's guns.

Bellmartin moved. As quick as a flash he had bobbed to one side. He was coming up with the carbine. The muzzle leaped upward, but even as it leaped two terrible gashes of fire licked toward him.

"Steel! Steel!" The voice was still crying on the rim of the slope. "Run, Steel, run! The law is after you! *The law is after you and your men!*"

But Honest Jack Bellmartin did not hear the voice now.

"Steel! Steel!" pleaded the crying girl on the hill. *"Run!"*

31

NANKA DELL saw him coming. She heard him say something to the four men who were with him. Beyond him, the Government men under Andrew Gossett and the sheriff from Wolf Creek Crossing were closing in on the others. All the shooting had come to a sudden end. Men were running forward now with their hands in the air.

Straight toward Nanka Dell the sweat-lathered black mare was coming. In a few moments The Rio Kid was there. His black hat came off.

"Yes, ma'am!" he bowed. "I heard you calling me. I couldn't answer the first time."

"The—the law is here!" cried the girl, pointing down the slope. "They say they're going to arrest you, along with the others. They—they locked Dad up in jail to—to keep him from coming here and telling you. They want you, but, mostly, Steel, they want your men."

"Three of my men are dead, ma'am," he told her, solemnly, "but I'm certainly thanking you for coming."

He glanced behind him. Marshall, Corbey, Whistling Hank and Big Mike were making their get-away. Once in the hills they would

ride any posse down. And they had their orders. They knew now what to do. There was no reason to trouble about them. He looked back at the girl.

"Ma'am, I'm thanking you for coming." He had leaned closer. "I guess it's all over now. Good-bye."

He had thrust down his ungloved hand. Falteringly the girl put up her hand. He took it tenderly, and looked straight into her eyes.

"Good—good-bye, St-Steel!"

"You are crying, ma'am!"

"Ye-yes, Steel. I—I can't help it."

"Why, ma'am?" Hard and glinty were his eyes now, so hard, so cold and spiritlessly grey they were like eyes in a dead man's head. "Why do you cry when you look at me?"

She could not answer him. She was sobbing then. She leaned forward, pillowing her head against his knee. He felt the sobs shake her. He turned his head and looked down the slope. A party of horsemen were heading toward him. As swift, as furious as a striking eagle he was reaching down. His arms closed around the girl. He lifted her, pulling her across the saddle in front of him. From a gouge of his rowels, the black mare shot away, a racing black cloud in the fading sunlight.

"Don't Steel, don't!" cried the girl, struggling in his arms. "Don't —don't take me away!"

She was sobbing wildly then. For a few moments she fought him. She scratched his face and saw the blood on her finger-tips. Then, sobbing as if her heart would break, her arms were around him. White dress fluttering in the wind, her black hair bannering, she was clinging to him.

"Run, Steel, run!" she whispered with her tear-wet face pressed against his throat. "Run! *Run!*"

* * * * *

"Know him? Hell, yes, I know 'im, if you will pardon the French, as the old saying goes, Reverend Dawson." Andrew Gossett was grinning down there in the valley as he stood in front of Dawson. Dawson looked like a bandit chieftain in the six-shooters that were strung around his middle. "He goes by the name of The Rio Kid. Sometimes is called Steel. Used to trail with Two-Gun Dave Steel—"

"Two-Gun Dave Steel?"

"I didn't get through, parson. Steel's name excites you, doesn't it? Yes, I know, parson." Gossett nodded his head. "I've heard your story from you as well as from Bellmartin."

"But—but——"

"Just keep still!" ordered Gossett. "I'm a man who could never be hurried. You have a sister over in the Three Forks country. Years ago she married Dave Steel. Likeable fellow, they say, with a band of cattle all of his own. You and the rest of the family didn't

like it. You were against the marriage, and fought it from every angle you could. Dave Steel was sent away to the pen for a rustling scrape. One, they tell me, that he didn't do, and by your preaching and the rest of the family's knocking, Laura left Steel and wouldn't have anything more to do with him. They had a youngster that was born just a few weeks—or maybe months—before Steel went off to the pen. Your sister Laura even took the child to the jail to see his father, but when you folks had Steel put away, you thought you were done with him. Laura was simply *made* to have nothing to do with him. Steel stayed away a year or so, and was never able to get his wife to see the mistake. When the boy was between two and three Dave Steel called for him—and took him. I——"

"Is—is this—this man——"

"Why, he's Jim Steel, of course, though he, himself, doesn't exactly know it." Gossett chuckled. "The fact is, parson, he doubts it very much. I thought I'd look him up and give him some papers Jack Bellmartin had been keeping in a fireproof safe in the Walking Horse. I suppose I'll have to give you those papers now——"

"But—but——"

"'But' what else is there to tell you?" snapped Gossett. "Great guns, man, I've told you all of it, just as I got it from Bellmartin and the papers that Two-Gun Dave Steel had sewed up in the cantle of a saddle. By the way, too, there was ten thousand dollars in currency in the saddle. Maybe you can get it, some way, out of the property Bellmartin's left on our hands in Seven Trumps. I don't know the law on such things. Not in my line, parson. I'm supposed to be sort of a detective——"

* * * * *

But The Rio Kid had no intention of going back to Seven Trumps. Not for some time, at the least. At midnight, far up in the hills at a fairly large town, he was urging a man out of bed and leading the way to a dark, gloomy-looking courthouse. Under the name of David Steel he had purchased his license to marry one Nanka Dell. A sleepy-eyed judge had done the rest; and a man with a hundred dollars in gold in his pocket and a letter addressed to Tipton Dell, had left the town, heading for Seven Trumps.

Ten days later a lumbering covered wagon, drawn by two stout horses while a black mare trailed behind on a lead-rope, rolled lazily down through the brown Wyoming hills. At night they made their camps by the whispering streams where the tall cottonwoods lifted their long arms to the sky.

THE END

Be sure to read the latest **WESTERN NOVEL CLASSIC**

THE HARD RIDERS

By TOM J. HOPKINS

● Yakima and Slim had ridden across three states and a territory to Arizona's Bloody Valley—a journey with a prison break at one end and death at the other!

● Twenty years before, Yakima's wife, Jane, had left him, taking their young son. Yakima and Slim were outlaws, she said, for she could not see that there are times when a man must fight for his rights.

● Now it was Clarke Raeburn, Yakima's son, who led the small ranchers in their fight against "Kill" Kellman's lawless land-grabbing. The law could not help them, for in that country Kellman was the law; only the steady aim and the desperate courage of Yakima and Slim could turn the tide.

● This racing story of the old-time Western gun fighters—the "hard riders," the men driven into outlawry—is told in a way that few Western writers can match.

For sale AT ALL NEWSSTANDS wherever magazines are sold!

A FIGHTING Western Novel
RIO KID & A FIGHTING WESTERN